

## The Wild Geese's Tomb

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# The Wild Geese's Tomb

by [The Feels Whale \(miscellea\)](#)

## Summary

Lan Zhan dies two years before canon and promptly wakes up in the library at Cloud Recesses right across from Wei Wuxian, napping facedown in a pile of copywork.

He has a lot of questions. Is this the afterlife? If it's not, then is he alone with his memories? And most importantly, what does he need to do to keep his soulmate alive this time?

*Wei Ying did not stir as he knelt down by the desk. It had been so long since Lan Zhan had seen those beloved features and even longer since he'd been allowed to either get or stay this close to Wei Ying.*

*He looked so different from Lan Zhan's memories; apple cheeked, clean, and relaxed.*

*Lan Zhan clamped both hands over his own mouth to stop the pained noise that threatened to escape him. Hot tears spilled down his face as he watched the young, safe, and whole boy sleep. His stomach cramped with the effort of holding the sound in, but he'd sooner die than wake Wei Ying up.*

## Notes

FUCKING MO DAO ZU SHI.

Anyway, here you go. I gotta go back to performing CPR on my other fics.  
The title is taken from 'The Wild Geese's Tomb' a poem by Yuan Haowen.  
FYI, the tentative title assigned to this fic by my roommate during a beta session was 'Everybody Wangxian Tonight'.

The whole thing is complete, I'm just in edits. :)

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

# Chapter 1

Lan Zhan was about to die.

He admitted it to himself as the voices calling for him in the forest began to recede. He could still hear the nighttime insects and birds about as well as before, which meant the rest of his hunting party was getting further away from the rough crevasse he'd fallen into, where he lay impaled on a rough spear of splintered wood.

He thought it might have been a tree once, snapped off at the trunk, still rooted firmly enough in the rocky soil to hold fast, and sharp enough at the tip to go all the way through him when Lan Zhan's quarry -a mutated boar with extra tusks and some five hundred extra pounds of bodyweight- got in a lucky blow as it died that threw him backwards into the crevasse.

The bottom of the ravine was lined with broken off a decomposing copse of plant life that had been choked out by the dense canopy overhead. It was pure bad luck that he fell badly while temporarily stunned. The walls of the ravine made sound echo strangely, which further impeded his ability to call for help.

The creature was dead at least. That was something.

He was too tired to yell anymore and, worryingly, the pain was starting to fade. Given the amount of blood on the ground around him, he was probably bleeding out. His cultivation was high enough that it would take a *lot* to kill him, but this seemed to be the perfect storm of circumstances; a sudden systemic shock, heavy blood loss, he couldn't feel his legs or one of his arms, and no one was close enough to help him.

Lan Zhan's breath came in short harsh pants as he closed his eyes. This was not the end he'd anticipated. If asked, he'd had pictured himself dying of old age while sitting at a desk or perhaps tilted over his instrument long after he'd seen A-Yuan across the final thresholds of independence.

He'd deliberately stopped driving himself towards immortality so he'd known an end would come one day. He'd only wanted the strength necessary to complete his promises. Living forever was undesirable, but he'd wanted to stay long enough to see his son become an adult.

This would have to do.

Sizhui was old enough now to care for himself. Xichen would step in where Lan Zhan could not. He could make his reluctant peace with that.

"Wei Ying..." He rasped.

It was selfish to be grateful for such an early, unlooked for end. Thirty-five was too young for someone to be taken from their family, but Lan Zhan had been living on duty, regrets, and memories ever since his heart had been carved out of him at the age of twenty-two.

Hadn't he earned *some* small measure of mercy?

Lan Zhan was familiar enough with death to know that his brief absence of pain followed by a short burst of what pretended to be strength and vitality was a *very* bad sign. His body was no longer fighting on his behalf. Trying to escape the ravine would just hasten his end and, as much as he welcomed that final rest, he had a duty to remain among the living for every second he'd been sentenced to.

The flush of adrenaline abandoned him all too soon as cold began to seep into his limbs and he became sleepy.

Would he see Wei Ying again if he woke up? If he called out in the afterlife, after so many years of playing Inquiry into the unbroken night, would he *finally* get a response?

Lulled by the possibility of such a sweet dream, Lan Zhan succumbed to the darkness.

It was brief -just the space between one blink and the next- and he opened his eyes seated behind the proctor's desk in the Library at Cloud Recesses --not the one they'd built to replace what the Wen had burned, but the old one he'd known as a boy.

He no longer hurt. He was no longer cold.

At the same time, just for a moment, he wondered if he was being punished for going quietly to his death.

Lan Zhan looked around, assailed by memories everywhere his eyes landed. There was the shelf he'd stood behind to monitor Wei Ying, but more than once had gotten so involved with watching the boy's hand on the pen that he missed the minute when he'd devolved into doodling rather than copying lines.

Then, *then* his wounded gaze came to rest on a dozing figure slumped over one of the student desks surrounded by folded out books.

Lan Zhan rose with shaking legs.

Wei Ying did not stir as he knelt down by the desk. It had been so long since Lan Zhan had seen those beloved features and even longer since he'd been allowed to either get *or* stay this close to Wei Ying.

He looked so different from Lan Zhan's memories; apple cheeked, clean, and relaxed.

Lan Zhan clamped both hands over his own mouth to stop the pained noise that threatened to escape him. Hot tears spilled down his face as he watched the young, safe, and *whole* boy sleep.

His stomach cramped with the effort of holding the sound in, but he'd sooner die than wake Wei Ying up.

When was the last time he'd seen Wei Ying healthy like this; without resentful energy and deprivation eating him alive from the inside like an insidious tumor? *Years*.

Was *this* why no one had ever been able to summon his spirit? Because it had gone to hide in a happy memory?

Was their time in the library such a memory?

If that were the case then Lan Zhan would *happily* spend an eternity guarding Wei Ying's sleep and only wonder how he got so lucky, but as pain built up in his knees he couldn't quite make himself believe that was the case.

Pain in death was different from pain in life. A ghost could kneel on stones all day, but what tormented them would only ever be what had hurt them while they were still alive. They didn't accumulate new torments.

No force on earth could make him move or reach out to shake Wei Ying's shoulder though, no matter how much he hurt or what hunger built in his stomach. He didn't know what to make of those sensations and put them aside rather than leave his post.

The light faded to mellow gold as he watched Wei Ying sleep on. Shadows stretched across the library floor and it was not until a distant gong rang to announce the evening meal that Wei Ying woke with a start and a thin thread of drool connecting his mouth to the desk.

"Ah...?" He looked around, sleepy and confused. "AH!" He fell back on his seat, pointing at Lan Zhan in shock. "Y-you!"

Neither death nor age had made Lan Zhan into a poet. His heart was in his throat and all he could do was nod once. Which 'you' was Wei Ying referring to? The disciplinary master of Cloud Recesses or his zhiji come to join him in a beautiful corner of the afterlife?

He waited for a better clue.

The bell rang again and Xichen -of all people- stepped into the library looking vaguely concerned, but otherwise serene. Things stopped making sense.

"You have both stayed late today," he said, kindly. "Diligence is virtuous, but perhaps it is time to stop for the day?"

"A... Zewu-jun?" Wei Ying looked guiltily between them before saluting once, sharply, and fleeing the scene leaving behind all his open books and papers. The one under his face was a rude picture of Lan Qiren that Lan Zhan snatched up, folded in half, and slipped into his sleeve before his brother had an opportunity to notice it.

"Such energy." Xichen observed with a fond smile as Wei Ying walked away as fast as once possibly could without being caught running. He turned to look at Lan Zhan, who was sorting through the remaining papers either for any more incriminating drawings or one he might be able to keep on the sly.

He'd spent nearly twenty years wishing he had kept the portrait Wei Ying had drawn of him. Aside from the flower in his hair, it was a flattering likeness.

“Leave that, Wangji. Wei-gongzi can deal with it tomorrow, but...” Xichen paused to consider his words in a way Lan Zhan had often wished he wouldn’t. “...perhaps it’s better to not be *so* diligent about this punishment. It’s already in excess of the guidelines laid out by our ancestors.”

Lan Zhan remembered only too well the discussion his brother and uncle had had on the subject behind closed doors. His uncle was an elder, their closest living relative who hadn’t shut himself away from them, and even if he wasn’t the acting Sect Leader anymore filial piety dictated that his wishes were to be treated as law.

At the same time, however, Lan Qiren had violated several of the disciplines himself in that unfortunate debate. Lan Zhan had been unwilling to hear anything against his uncle at the time, but the rules were clear on several points and made no allowance for seniority; do not become heated in debate, violence is not permitted between student and teacher nor teacher and student, no one may be punished for hypothetical crimes or their personal thoughts.

He had not been willing to entertain those thoughts until after everything was over and done with as he observed his period of reflection and penance in the Cold Water Cave.

There he came to question a great many things.

Lan Zhan couldn’t voice those thoughts now. There’d be no point and someone else might be set to monitor Wei Ying if his uncle thought he’d gotten soft.

He wouldn’t have thought this as a teenager, but as a man he’d come to realize that there were many interpretations of the Disciplines despite the exhaustive detail of the original text. It was possible for someone to betray them while wholeheartedly believing they were following them to the letter.

“Mn,” he said, instead.

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The dream continued in strange, brutally realistic detail. He ate a bland dinner with his brother and uncle before retiring to his own house with real fear in his heart over what he might find there.

Outside, the Jingshi was the same as it had been in his youth. He had never made many changes aside from replacing old furniture as it wore out or no longer fit his use. In many ways, it was still the house his mother had left behind and it hadn’t taken much damage when Cloud Recesses burned; just the garden.

He stopped, arrested by the sight of blue gentians surrounding the private little house and his throat began to ache again all over.

His mother’s flowers.

Lan Zhan knelt on the white gravel path outside his home to breathe them in and found himself silently weeping for the second time that day.

He hadn't replaced them after they burned and left the beds empty. He'd told Xichen it was because flowers required too much care and he was gone too much despite neither of those barriers having ever stopped him before.

Xichen had eventually replaced the gentians with gnarled pine trees and ornamental stone arrangements that tolerated chronic neglect. Neither of them admitted the truth, which was that Lan Zhan wanted his mother's garden or none at all.

Feeling scraped raw, he retreated inside.

Inside, it was much the same as he'd last left it. There were fewer books. Lan Zhan's private collection was very small as a teenager. His namesake, Wangji, sat on his desk under a cloth as he did not carry it with him unless he was outside of Cloud Recesses.

The instrument had been well cared for by its previous owner, Lan Zhan's father, and then later by Lan Zhan before the Sunshot campaign where he'd had to carry it into real battle. There wasn't a scratch on it now and Lan Zhan sat heavily down in front of the qin, wondering if instead of dying he'd gone mad instead.

He was forced to conclude that he *wasn't* insane the next morning when he reported to the lecture hall with eyes sandy from lack of sleep and his stomach still upset from nerves. No fever dream could be so relentlessly, *meticulously* realistic.

In his real youth, Lan Zhan hadn't made many memories of Wei Wuxian during their shared classes during these days. If Wei Wuxian wasn't acting out then Lan Zhan had kept his focus riveted on the lecturer. He knew most of the material, but attended the lectures in order to learn how to teach.

With the perspective of an adult, he was forced to admit his uncle wasn't a particularly good instructor so he'd just been wasting his time.

There was a reason Xichen had slowly retired their uncle from the lecture hall, ostensibly to spend more time on the research that he liked better anyway, but also because too many of the disciples taught by Lan Qiren had shown an unbecoming lack of flexibility and independent judgement.

Lan Zhan had originally assumed Xichen was complicit in the way a staggering number of Lan disciples frequently appeared under Jin sect command. He later learned that his Uncle's students were just a little *too* good at following orders. They had been conditioned not to question the person giving them too closely either.

That was fine in Cloud Recesses, but Jin Guangshan took advantage of it several times as Chief Cultivator before he slipped up badly enough for Xichen to catch him. By that point, he either couldn't endanger his position by admitting wrongdoing or he'd established enough false precedent that he'd become convinced that authority had *always* been his.

The incident caused a major rift between the two sects that wasn't really bridged until Jin Guangyao, Xichen's sworn brother, took over as the new Jin-zongzhu.

It had been an ugly day for everyone involved, but especially for Lan Zhan who'd never quite understood what his dead sect brothers and sisters had been *doing* in Zixun's horrific prison camp or at the ambush at Qiongqi path in the first place.

The rules condemned ambush tactics almost as harshly as experimentation with resentful energy. Disciples of Lan Sect weren't even allowed to carry boot knives because they counted as concealed weapons.

With that thought in mind, Lan Zhan had more attention to free up for his current priority; observing Wei Ying to see if he was the only one living in this blissful dream --if it was, indeed, a dream.

What Wei Ying did during classes was doodle unless something interesting was happening or there was a discussion section or he was in a mood for mischief. He showed admirable command of the material when it came to be his turn to speak so he *was* doing the readings. He just could not, *would* not handle boredom.

Lan Zhan knew part of his younger self's issue with Wei Ying was the unauthorized attraction sparking between them, therefore *everything* Wei Ying did had been infuriating to him. So it shouldn't have come as a shock that he, an older soul who had accepted the will of his heart, saw less to object to in Wei Ying's present behavior.

Still, something felt off.

He often felt the weight of Wei Ying's regard, but whenever he looked back the other boy was looking away. There were no papermen visiting his desk or illicit snacks tossed his way. He didn't think he'd changed his own behavior that much. So why was Wei Ying acting differently?

Did it mean what he hoped it meant? Or was he just reaching out to shadows?

The biggest change, however, came from an unexpected quarter.

Following the afternoon break, he arrived at class to find a desk -one that had been added after Wen-guniang and Wen-gongzi's arrival, but had gone empty this entire time- was suddenly filled by Wen-guniang herself.

Wen Qing sat neatly in her place wearing disciple whites -a stark contrast to the Wen red she'd worn her entire visit thus far- with her materials arranged in front of her as she stared straight ahead. Her shoulders had no crests. There wouldn't have been time for a seamstress to embroider any and the Wen sect never sent guest disciples so there were no old ones for her to wear.

Lan Zhan had never once seen her enter the lecture hall after the disastrous introduction she'd received from her putrid cousin. She'd been on a mission that took all her focus; finding the yin iron fragment of GusuLan.

What reason did she now have to attend the lectures? None.



Not unless she already knew where the yin iron was.

If she already knew where it was, she still had no reason to attend the lectures --unless she knew what reporting its location would bring down, not only on Cloud Recesses and the entire cultivation world, but also her people on Dafan Mountain.

Attending classes could be a stalling tactic while she, like he, tried to make sense of what had happened to her.

Lan Zhan received an unexpected sign of confirmation when Wei Ying arrived in class at the very last second laughing between Nie Huaisang and a much more relaxed teenaged Jiang Wanyin as he hassled Jin Zixuan a bit in the entrance. Lan Zhan had originally found that behavior unbecoming, but further acquaintance with Jin Zixuan led him to decide a little spiritual mortification would do the man good so he now turned a blind eye to Wei Ying's minor hazing.

Wen Qing's gaze cut towards Wei Ying's oblivious back as he entered and a painful vulnerability appeared in her eyes; an expression that sat at total odds with the stalwart and prickly woman he remembered from Tiannu temple. Her lower lip trembled with emotion before she turned to face decisively forward.

His stomach cramps were back by the time his uncle took his place at the front of the room.

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Returning to the library was heaven and hell in equal measures.

Lan Zhan had figured out roughly when he was. They were a week and a half into the month it would take Wei Ying to make his copies. It might take even less time. The first time Wei Ying had earned two extensions on his punishment.

The last thing he wanted to do was alienate his own zhiji further, but Lan Zhan couldn't fight his growing certainty that the impossible had happened.

He'd returned to his own past.

He had a second chance to exorcise his regrets.

When Wei Ying dragged himself in, escorted by his merciless sect brother, Lan Zhan did not do any of the things he wanted to. He did not drag Wei Ying into the secret sect library to pin him against the wall. He did not haul his zhiji all the way back to the Jingshi to barricade them both inside. He did not punch Jiang Wanyin in the face or keep punching until there was no face left.

Instead, Lan Zhan sat quietly as Wei Ying got situated and started doing his copies without complaint.

He was immediately suspicious and tried to remember the highlights from Wei Ying's library pranks, but apparently he was in for a day of Wei Ying actually doing the work. There had to

have been more of those days than not since he finished on time, even though it hadn't felt like it at the time.

This time, at least, Wei Ying was looking at him. Lan Zhan pretended to read a book of poetry as he watched Wei Ying watch.

The trick was not to let Wei Ying know he knew he was being observed. Lan Zhan gazed at him through the veil of his lashes and drank every precious moment in. He missed the mischievous class pranks, but this was also very welcome.

Wei Ying didn't doze off, but he did meander off into a series of doodles; rabbits, spell formulae, and something that looked like a mathematical puzzle or maybe the very early drafts of an array. Lan Zhan was not a spell writer the way Wei Ying was. His speciality was musical cultivation so he'd need to take a closer look that wasn't currently feasible.

He let it go on as long as his conscience allowed. He didn't care about the punishment. Xichen was right. It was excessive; suitable for a fourth or fifth offense where violence had been involved, not the first offense of a guest who'd just asked a few uncomfortable questions.

Lan Zhan didn't like having his nose rubbed in just how different a place Cloud Recesses had been when he was a boy. Everything about his Sect had softened so gradually under Xichen's leadership that it took this sudden return to the past to make him understand that Wei Ying would have never trusted the Lan sect to shelter him during the Sunshot campaign or afterwards.

Still, he eventually set his book down and said, "Wei Ying. Continue copying." His tone wasn't as stern as his role demanded, but sternness had never done him any good with Wei Ying. It was unlikely to happen now.

He was softer than he'd been as a teenager; harder in others, but softer as well. Seventeen year old Lan Wangji hadn't known how to relent. He hadn't known how to decide when a rule was either a bad rule or just did not apply universally. He had in fact been terrified of the prospect of flexible morality.

Time had not tamed Lan Zhan, but it had taught him that not *every* battle needed fighting. Sometimes a gentle redirection was all that was necessary.

He didn't realize he'd made a mistake until the silence he received in response became too loud. He turned to find Wei Ying staring at him, jaw dropped and face pink.

Lan Zhan's own ears caught fire.

Wei Wuxian rocked back in his seat with a brilliant, incandescent smile on his face and it was all for Lan Zhan. He turned instinctively towards it, like a flower seeking sunlight.

"Sorry, sorry!" Wei Ying apologized. He did not comment on the familiar form of address, but then again why would he? They were schoolmates and the same age. The only one who'd ever insisted on formality between them had been Lan Zhan. "I wandered off. Forgive me?"

“Mn.” Lan Zhan, unable to bear the weight of a smile he had not seen in years and had mourned long before he grieved for the rest of Wei Ying, turned away with heat still in his ears. “Begin.”

With a chuckle, Wei Ying did and left Lan Zhan alone with his whirling stomach and whirling thoughts.

If he really *had* been given a second chance, Lan Zhan wasn't sure what all he'd be able to *do* with it.

He had not come into power or respect until after he and Jiang Wanyin had liberated the stolen swords of the Great Sects' young masters. It was a long haul between his position as the protected and cosseted child of the main Lan Clan and his emergence into cultivation society as Hanguang-jun.

Wei Ying had turned to demonic cultivation by then. He'd been thrown into the burial mounds and had been changed there; less changed than Lan Zhan had thought once, but still changed in ways that hurt him and made him hide.

At the same time, Lan Zhan wasn't certain they could win the war *without* the Yiling Laozu.

No one really admitted that anymore.

The Great Sects had rewritten history so that the Sunshot Campaign had turned effortlessly with their entry into the fray; that the smaller independent sects had been the ones struggling under Wen Ruohan's boot despite the fact that most of them had been wiped out or absorbed long before the Wen turned their attention to larger prey.

Some sect leaders, namely the outspoken toadies like Yao-zongzhu, had internalized that revisionist history to the point where they truly believed it.

Part of him was willing to let the cultivation society burn if saving it meant giving up even the smallest piece of Wei Ying. Lan Zhan had nearly given his life once to preserve the wisdom of their ancestors when Wen Xu came and it meant nothing the first time he disagreed with the Lan elders.

There was not even the slightest chance that Wei Ying would let him *do* it, but Lan Zhan had long ago made his peace with the fact that his zhiji was a better person in reality than Hanguang-jun was in the eyes of the public.

Lan Zhan did not keep Wei Ying in the library late that day. It took physical effort not to follow him back to the guest houses. Lan Zhan knew he had no welcome there just from past experience. Wei Ying might welcome him in, but no one else would.

He waited until Wei Ying was gone before he sorted through the burn bin for the sketches left behind. He found two; one of a pair of tussling rabbits and one of an egret holding a brush in one claw that would have been comedic except for the beauty and poise of the bird itself. Neither were examples of Wei Ying's best work, but Lan Zhan had very little shame left by

that point. He'd been surviving on fading memories and a bookmark for a decade and a half. He would take whatever he could and treat it like jade.

The two drawings he rescued hung heavy in his sleeve as he sat down to the evening meal. When he returned to the Jingshi, he stored them in the box he usually kept for sheet music. The drawings, shuffled in with his own musical notes, would not be obvious or easy to find.

He sat down at his guqin by habit, but stopped playing abruptly as the first few bars of Inquiry left his fingertips.

Lan Zhan stilled the strings with his palms, unwilling to examine his own motivations too closely, before taking himself away to his solitary bed.

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The lecture hall, that following morning, had another new and this time even less expected occupant.

Meng Yao sat at the remaining empty desk. It had been shuffled over to be next to Nie Huaisang. Unlike Wen-guniang, he was one enormous and exposed nerve as he sat wearing a set of guest disciple whites he'd clearly borrowed from his own young master.

Lan Zhan was not sure what he was doing there. Jin Guangyao, as he recalled, hadn't made much progress as a cultivator until the Jin sect was forced to acknowledge him. Then they had to hurry to bring him up from behind. He was fully literate and intelligent, but Lan Zhan knew he didn't have the fundamentals necessary to participate in these lectures.

Why was he there?

The set of Meng Yao's shoulders indicated he didn't know either.

Whispers rippled through the other guest disciples as they all filtered in, which Lan Zhan silenced with a *look*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Xichen chose to audit that day's lectures. Lan Zhan might have once thought it was to put down any unseemly whispering that Meng Yao's presence would stir up, but he'd seen the way they would one day look at each other *far* too often to believe that now.

Whether *Xichen* realized he was only there to admire Meng Yao's prettily blushing face was a different question; one Lan Zhan did not ever care to know the answer to.

This new change had longer reaching implications for Lan Zhan than he immediately realized because when he reported to the library for the evening's copying session he discovered that one of the student desks had not one, but *two* occupants. Neither of them were Wei Ying.

Meng Yao was already surrounded by supplemental readings and Xichen was in the process of graciously setting down another in front of him, despite the overwhelmed expression already creeping into the other man's gaze.

If there was one thing Lan Zhan was familiar with it was the intimidating nature of his own brother's brand of helpfulness.

On the other hand, Lan Zhan did not care to intervene. He'd been relying on his fearsome reputation to keep the building clear during these evenings. Even his sect brothers and sisters tended to give a place wide berth if they thought he was going to be there. If they thought Xichen might appear then they'd keep an even further distance away. He could tolerate Meng Yao's presence in exchange for that.

It was then that Wei Ying arrived.

"Oh?" He observed with a growing smile as he entered, looking totally charmed for no reason whatsoever as he took in Meng Yao's presence. He sobered a bit and saluted Xichen when Lan Zhan's brother came around from behind the central stacks. "Zewu-jun."

"Wei-gongzi." Xichen smiled. "I was hoping to encounter you here."

Wei Ying blinked, at a polite loss. Lan Zhan did the same. "Ah?" His gaze strayed towards his messy workspot and he winced. "What may I do for you?"

Xichen looked far too pleased with himself. "Your sister mentioned to me that you have taken over many of the introductory classes in YunmengJiang and that your students perform quite well."

*No.*

Lan Zhan's grip on the book he'd selected for the day's camouflage tightened to the point where he was surprised it didn't disintegrate between his clenched fingertips.

Wei Ying cocked his head and his gaze stayed admirably centered on Xichen's face. "That is true," he allowed.

"I have a proposition in that case." Xichen tucked his flute behind his back and turned to include Meng Yao in the conversation. The man in question seemed to realize where this conversation was going and straightened in his seat. His eyes began to glow with the kind of hope that cut. "Meng Yao has been granted the opportunity to study here at Cloud Recesses. He came to his training late and his education in Qighe has been driven by necessity rather than structure. It's led to some unavoidable gaps. If you are amenable, I would like to propose a compromise. You were sentenced to a month of copying. Would you be willing to exchange it for a month of tutorials?"

Wei Ying smiled and Lan Zhan's heart sank. "With Meng-gongzi's permission, of course." He saluted a little less formally to Meng Yao, but more kindly than any of their classmates would have. "I'm inexperienced, but always glad to help."

Meng Yao hurried to return the gesture. "Please!" His voice cracked on the word.

He collected himself and showed them the polished expression Lan Zhan was used to seeing from him. Still, his enthusiasm seemed genuine. Maybe receiving instruction from the

elevated son of a servant seemed less likely to end in humiliation than being tutored by a proper young master of the sects. Lan Zhan remembered all too well the treatment Jin Guangyao had received in Koi Tower and that had been in a public setting; no telling what happened behind closed doors.

“This humble student welcomes any instruction Wei-gongzi sees fit to share,” Meng Yao said with an eagerness that was palpable.

“Don’t tell me that.” Wei Ying laughed; bright, beautiful, and heartbreaking when directed towards someone else as it usually was. “I’ll end up teaching you nothing except fishing and playing.”

“I am already familiar with both,” Meng Yao replied with admirable calm. “Perhaps we might start with this?” He held up an old primer on the manipulation of spiritual energy outside of one’s body. “There are some terms and references I am not clear on.”

“Wangji.” Xichen turned to him as the other two men got involved with the book in question. “I will have to impose on you to continue to supervise these sessions. I do not think Wei-gongzi will abuse my trust, but it would be simpler if Uncle never had cause to question it and I have concerns that Meng-gongzi’s study time will need to be...” he searched for a word and winced as he failed to find it.

Lan Zhan nodded once, both bitter and grateful that even though his time with Wei Ying would no longer be spent alone he was at least not losing it entirely.

It did turn out, though, that he’d traded one pleasure for another.

Wei Ying was an excellent teacher, something Lan Zhan had never known before. He was interesting, patient, and engaging; willing to tackle any barrier in his student’s understanding from multiple angles until he found the one that worked. No wonder Jiang Wanyin had been so strident about Wei Ying needing to help him revive YunmengJiang. He knew what Wei Ying’s best looked like and knew he wasn’t getting anything close to it.

Lan Zhan still didn’t like the man, but he could sympathize a little.

Meng Yao had a golden core. The Nie sect had served him that well at least, but he did not seem to have been introduced to the idea of developing it further.

He, like many rogue cultivators, had the idea that spiritual strength was something decided at the outset of a cultivator’s development by fate or karma; that the elders lived for so long because they started out strong, not that they were so strong because they’d tended to their cores for far longer than a junior cultivator would have had an opportunity to.

Powerful talents did emerge at times. Lan Zhan was one such and his brother was another, but that was the exception rather than the rule.

“It’s like a muscle...” Wei Ying explained after Xichen had reluctantly departed and they’d finished putting back over three quarters of the books Lan Zhan’s well intentioned brother had gotten out, although *not* before Meng Yao copied down all the titles. “...or maybe more

like a pearl that *acts* like a spiritual muscle. You start with a little flicker of a core and through daily meditation you layer on incrementally larger bits of your spiritual energy. The larger your core gets the more spiritual force you generate within a day. The bigger your daily allowance becomes, the more you can invest in your core.”

“I see.” Meng Yao said in the tone of one who didn’t really. “I have meditated, but I haven’t felt any different.”

“You do work blind for a while.” Wei Ying admitted. “Still, there’s specific techniques. It’s not the same as what monks do. This isn’t about inner peace. It’s an exercise. Do you think you could get into the right frame of mind here while I watch you?”

Lan Zhan’s role in this matter ended up being less of a supervisor and more of a minder when both young men tried to work through the dinner hour.

Meng Yao had had a breakthrough under Wei Ying’s patient instruction and was still riding the resulting high when it was time to stop for the day. Wei Ying, as always, echoed other people’s emotions right back at them and was every bit as engaged. Neither wanted to quit so it was up to Lan Zhan to intervene.

He ended up taking them both all the way back to the guest houses when he noticed they kept sliding back into discussion. When that happened they’d stop walking and needed to be prodded back into motion. It was close enough to curfew that he felt comfortable chivvying them along.

“Ah, thanks.” Wei Ying addressed him for the first time that day when Lan Zhan deposited him at his own door. “I got a little carried away, huh?”

They were all but alone, standing closer than Lan Zhan could remember them ever being when someone wasn’t injured or ill. The sun had eased down below the horizon and velvety blue shadows spread across the grounds, leavened only by the soft glow of stone lanterns.

Lan Zhan was saved from making a reply when Jiang Wanyin leaned out of his own room and bellowed, “You’re late! I am going to eat all your food!”

He started forward, automatically offended by Jiang Wanyin breathing air in his presence, but drew up short by habit. He’d never had the leisure or authority to cause Jiang-zongzhu half the trouble he would have liked to, but Jiang Wanyin was just a child now. An angry terrible child. It wouldn’t be justice and there was a real possibility Wei Ying would fight him if he tried.

“You’d better not!” Wei Ying bellowed back.

Jiang Yanli said something soft and disapproving from inside the room that brought both of them immediately to heel; a trick Lan Zhan would dearly love to learn someday.

“Ah, goodnight.” Wei Ying smiled at him over his shoulder. “Be careful going back, Lan Zhan.”

It was strange how different their interactions were now, although maybe not really.

Even in his youth, Lan Zhan knew he'd been the author of most of his own trouble when it came to their relationship. Knowing hadn't been enough to compensate for his issues. *He'd* been the one holding back for various reasons, all of which no longer seemed quite so compelling.

Wei Ying had always been willing to meet him wherever he set the tone of their interactions - just so long as they interacted.

Wasn't this proof?

"Mn," he said and turned to go, holding the memory of that smile (for him and *only* him) in his heart like a banked fire.

That didn't mean he was *totally* without questions.

"Xiongzhang." Lan Zhan kept his questions until after their shared meal, once they were walking back to their own rooms. This was an inquiry his uncle would shut down as a matter of course, since Meng Yao's inclusion in class was now a *fait accompli*. "We do not accept late start guest disciples."

"It was a personal favor to Nie-er-gongzi and his sect leader." Xichen replied, as though either of the Nie brothers had had anything to do with his decision. "He has concerns about how well Meng-gongzi is integrating with the Nie sect. This was a last minute request in response to something Nie-er-gongzi witnessed between Meng-gongzi and some members of their escort. I sent Meng-gongzi back to the Unclean Realms with a letter and Nie-zongzhu agreed that he would benefit from some additional instruction for the reasons I shared with Wei-gongzi. Meng-gongzi will audit the lectures, but not be expected to attempt the exams."

That sounded wildly out of character for someone who would go on to be known far and wide as 'the headshaker.'

Lan Zhan schooled his expression and resolved to keep his attention on Nie Huaisang.

If he was in his own past, repeating it, then the main question was; how had it happened? Who was responsible? Who else was here?

What did anyone expect to gain by sending him and, presumably, Wen-guniang back without consulting them or leaving some kind of clue as to what they were expected to do.

"I hope you will forgive me, Wangji," Xichen added out of nowhere.

Lan Zhan squinted at his brother, suspicious.

"You and Wei-gongzi seemed to be getting closer and then I added a distraction into the mix," Xichen explained with that indulgent older brother smile Lan Zhan sometimes wanted to wipe off his face. "I promise that I was trying to help. It seemed unfair to keep the barrier of your role as disciplinary master in the way of a good friendship. I didn't realize how it



would isolate you from your peers when Uncle suggested it. I'm glad Wei-gongzi doesn't seem to be intimidated by it."

'By you' is what he meant, but Lan Zhan accepted the critique.

It was a shame that *friendship* wasn't what he wanted from Wei Ying, but he already knew he'd take it if that's what was offered to him.

"Mn." Lan Zhan limited himself to a tight nod.

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The benefit *and* detriment of Wei Ying's punishment being cancelled was that other people felt freer to visit the library again.

Lan Zhan had treasured their time alone, but if it was already gone then he was relieved to know that his sect brothers and sisters didn't continue to feel shut out of a public facility.

The downside was that Lan Zhan actually had to act as a proctor when Wei Ying's rowdy friends attempted to visit and derail the tutoring sessions. Jiang Wanyin stopped bothering him once they realized he was seriously tutoring Meng Yao and that Meng Yao sorely needed the help. *Others* were 'friends' Wei Ying didn't seem to have been aware he had before, annoyances like Jin Zixun.

He was an easy person to roust. Lan Zhan didn't have to make it personal although doing so was deeply tempting. He had not forgotten who was responsible for the ambush that took Jin Zixuan's life and ended any hope of the Yiling Laozu's redemption in the eyes of cultivation society.

He waited until Jin Zixun made it obvious that he was there to cause trouble; he always started out friendly enough, as bullies often did, and pretended to be looking for a book while he listened in on the nature of Meng Yao's tutorial. Then nothing would do but that Meng Yao and Wei Ying be made aware that he'd mastered *that* sort of thing before he was *ten*.

Lan Zhan cut into that with a flat, "Be quiet while in the library."

Ten was, in fact, much later than most cultivators who were raised in a Sect learned to write a talisman so Lan Zhan wasn't sure what point he was trying to prove. Meng Yao was progressing very well, all things considered.

"I'm just visiting!" Jin Zixun defended himself.

"Leave." Lan Zhan was disinterested in his excuses. He knew Jin Zixun of old. He would only escalate if he was allowed to continue unchallenged.

Jin Zixun *tsked* in disdain and dropped the book he hadn't even opened yet on the floor.

"Touchy," he grumbled, but kept walking until he left Lan Zhan's view.

Wei Ying began to clap as he was out of sight and Lan Zhan, who'd started to get used to the idea that he wouldn't vanish again as soon, turned to give his zhiji an unimpressed look.

“So cool, Lan-er-gongzi,” he praised Lan Zhan, who felt the praise settle in his chest despite the fact that they were back to ‘Lan-er-gongzi’ in the presence of Meng Yao. He missed hearing the sound of his casual name already. “You’re too good.”

That, Lan Zhan had heard before. Too bad it wasn’t true.

He hadn’t gotten rid of Jin Zixun for any of the reasons he should have; rudeness, cruelty, or braggadocio. He’d done it to get rid of the mulish crinkle between Wei Ying’s eyes that he recognized as the only warning anyone ever got before Wei Ying escalated a situation beyond repair.

Not that it wouldn’t have been *immensely* cathartic to watch, given all the misfortunes Jin Zixun would become an eventual wellspring of, but in such circumstances Wei Ying was always the one who got punished. Lan Zhan wanted to stop that wherever he could, even if he accomplished nothing else in this new life.

Walking Wei Ying back to his dormitory that first night might have been a mistake, he realized later, when Wei Ying and Meng Yao pointedly included him in their conversation right before the point where they ought to have split up -they for the guest houses, him for his uncle’s rooms- and despite not being able to offer any contributions himself, he was unable to peel away.

He didn’t want to, obviously, but the dubious looks he ignored from passing guest disciples made it clear his presence in the guest quarter outside of a roomcheck was unappreciated.

Wei Ying carried the bulk of the conversation. Meng Yao’s casual conversation mostly involved agreeing with people, Lan Zhan noticed. It actually came as a relief to know he was not the only abominable conversationalist in his immediate peer group. He followed half a pace behind them, close enough to answer an occasional question and feel like a part of the group.

Jiang Wanyin was lurking around Wei Ying’s door again when he and Lan Zhan arrived. At sixteen, Jiang Wanyin was eager to make a good impression on the other young masters of his generation so he was currently in possession of more manners than seemed to have survived into his adulthood, but they were shallow somehow.

Currently, he was grinding his jaw in a way that was more familiar to Lan Zhan than any of his unpolished niceties. He’d evidently decided Lan Zhan had done something to offend Jiang. It would be amusing to learn what it was he’d done just so he could pointedly do it again.

Fortunately, Jiang Yanli was also present so her brother could not haul off and air his grievances.

Lan Zhan never had much of a relationship with her although he’d quietly, privately wanted one. The opportunity never presented itself. They were both too polite and too reserved to manage such a thing without someone like Wei Ying around as an intermediary and the war had never afforded them the opportunity.

“Lan-er-gongzi,” she greeted him with a flawless curtsy. “Thank you for bringing A-Xian back.”

“Mn.” Lan Zhan wasn’t sure what her tone meant. She sounded polite, but there was an undercurrent of something to it that he couldn’t parse. He turned to go.

“See you tomorrow, Lan Zhan?” Wei Ying called after him and Lan Zhan paused to give a small nod in his direction, unsure what to do about the faint note of desperation in Wei Ying’s voice. Surely he’d imagined it.

“*Oh!*” He heard Jiang Yanli murmur in his wake in a totally different tone than the faint undercurrent of hostility she’d greeted him with.

The last thing he heard as he passed out of the guest quarter was her melodic giggle and Wei Ying’s scandalized “Shijie!”

“Did something good happen?” Xichen asked as he arrived for supper. “You’re smiling.”

So he was, Lan Zhan realized. It was slight. Very few people would have noticed aside from his family, but he was.

“Meng-gongzi successfully wrote his first talisman today.” Lan Zhan tossed it out as a distraction and his brother swallowed the bait without hesitation.

“Oh?” Xichen’s demeanor warmed ten fold. “Which one?”

“Illusory butterflies.” It was an appropriate first spell; the sort of thing that nurtured love of the art. Lan disciples learned to make illusory ice flowers.

Lan Zhan did not mention Wei Ying’s extensive discourse on or Meng Yao’s rapt fascination with how that same elementary level spell could be used as a crude yet effective ward cracker. Given the way the Sunshot campaign concluded, he should have realized those two had more in common than they didn’t.

At least he knew now how Wei Ying had gotten in past the wards that first time and was embarrassed on his sect’s behalf.

“Hrmph.” His uncle stroked his beard.

Two days of instruction before an older student was able to write out and cast a spell spoke well of both the student *and* the instructor.

Some of their current crop of students couldn’t do much more than that. The only difference between them and Meng Yao at this point academically would be a broader base of knowledge regarding the taxonomy of the undead and monstrous.

He’d need continued oversight when it came to getting a handle on his core building exercises, but Wei Ying and Meng Yao had worked a small miracle between them.

This would reflect well on the Lan when he returned to Qinghe as a far more capable cultivator.

It hadn't been his idea, but Lan Qiren liked anything that added to the positive reputation of GusuLan. "Acceptable. Acceptable."

He incongruously seemed warmer on the subject of Wei Wuxian than he ever had --although after thinking about it for a while Lan Zhan vaguely recalled that his uncle hadn't taken so viciously against Wei Wuxian until he had publicly turned to demonic cultivation and even then he only really became vocal about it after the Sunshot campaign.

Before that he was annoyed and frustrated in turns by his student, but had counselled both Jin and Jiang-zongzhu to go easy on *both* their sons when they'd been called in to discuss the fight and then the subsequently tense issue of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan's engagement.

"If he continues to make such good progress then perhaps I should ask Wei-gongzi to continue the lessons more formally after the end of his term of service," Xichen thought out loud.

"The boy will have his own studies to attend to," Lan Qiren countered gruffly. "Despite the fact that he is *clearly* bored by them."

"Perhaps insufficiently challenged, given what we are now learning about him. Prodigies often act out in their youth," Xichen suggested delicately; touching on another tense subject.

He and their uncle disagreed on large parts of the subject matter guest disciples were meant to learn. Under Xichen's leadership, the guest lectures spent less time on the precepts of Lan that didn't apply to anyone who wouldn't be living in Cloud Recesses. In the outside world and other sects no one cared if you wore jangling beads and went to bed at *hai* hour or not.

Knowing where this was headed and having sat through far too many iterations of this same exceedingly polite disagreement already, Lan Zhan excused himself.

There was a bit of time still before he'd need to return for the night and he wanted to walk the paths of Cloud Recesses as it was in his boyhood.

If his feet took him in the direction of the guest quarter, it was only because there were more gardens that way and that's what Lan Zhan let himself believe. He didn't need to patrol. It wasn't his night to do so for one. For another, a Wei Ying who was interested and engaged in his daily activities was probably less likely to sneak out and assuage his boredom at night.

Probably.

He stilled as a ribbon of music threaded through the quiet night air; a dizi played by masterful and familiar hands.

The song was not the uncomfortably skill, yet compelling notes necessary to command the dead. Lan Zhan, in fact, recognized the song as 'High Mountains and Flowing Waters' adapted for the flute.

His throat tightened and Lan Zhan started forward. He knew objectively that Wei Ying must have learned to play long before he weaponized his music. A dizi -like most folk instruments- was relatively easy to carve. However, making a weapon like Chenqing was not something a starving novice could hope to accomplish.

Lan Zhan *intended* only to listen.

He found Wei Ying sitting on the top of the split level guest house he shared with his abhorrent brother. His back was to Lan Zhan and he was facing the moon, which hung heavy and full in the sky. He'd let his hair down and he'd changed into softer evening lounge clothes that were a shade of dark blue so close to black that Lan Zhan made himself look away.

If Wei Ying was also living in the past he would have done something outrageous by now.

The Yiling Laozu would have been even less able to content himself with Lan Qiren's lectures on how to wear a belt or the more impractical moral semantics of exorcism than a young Wei Ying.

Lan Zhan stepped under the eaves so as not to be obvious. He closed his eyes and lost himself to the music as Wei Ying transitioned into 'Plum Blossom Memories' and then 'Wild Geese Landing on the Sandbank.'

It was perhaps a good thing he'd never heard Wei Ying play so when they really were both boys. At sixteen he'd already known that he had *so* much more to hold back than his sect brothers and sisters yet he'd still been lost to Wei Ying's unconstrained smile almost from the word 'hello', but still tried for months to diligently scramble back from an edge he'd already fallen over. Hearing him play would have made it *infinitely* worse.

As an adult, Lan Zhan had made his peace with the knowledge that the tone of his desires were not compatible with the gentle loving relationship someone like Wei Ying needed more than anything else. Then, once Wei Ying passed away, there was no one else who'd moved him nor had he even wanted anyone to.

Lan Zhan was like his father in that way, maybe. He loved only once and badly. The only excuse he had for himself was that he'd at least learned from his father's mistakes and had never forced his suit on Wei Ying beyond that one regrettable moment of weakness on Phoenix Mountain.

He let himself lean back against the guest house, wondering if he could find some way to engineer an opportunity for them to play together, when 'Wild Geese' ended and Wei Ying began to play a song he shouldn't, *could* not have known.

The longing notes of 'Wangxian' struck Lan Zhan like an open handed slap.

He'd composed 'Wangxian' during his initial convalescence after the burning of Cloud Recesses, but never played it before another living soul until he found himself facing the likelihood of a slow death in the Xuanwu's cave.

Lan Zhan had bits and snatches of it in his head before then, but had not given into himself enough to actually write the song and polish it into something he wouldn't be ashamed of playing in front of one particular person before then.

He landed on the rooftop behind Wei Ying in utter silence, muffling his sound and presence as he could not have at his apparent physical age. Wei Ying, meanwhile, was deep into his playing and did not notice as he played 'Wangxian' with a care and reverence that Lan Zhan thought might yank the beating heart out of his chest.

Wei Ying noticed when Lan Zhan's powerful grip closed around his wrist though, startled into leaning back almost into the curve of Lan Zhan's shoulder in a tragic parody of a lover's embrace. His jaw dropped and his gray eyes flew wide in an expression that sent a thread of poorly timed arousal coiling through Lan Zhan's entire body.

"Lan Zhan!" His eyes flashed with --that was *guilt*, Lan Zhan realized. The soft looks he'd been catching from Wei Ying for days now had all been the same.

His memories *were* correct. Wei Ying *was* acting out less; not because Lan Zhan had been a bit gentler with him during his punishment detail, but because this was an older Wei Ying. He was Wei Ying in the immediate aftermath of the fall.

The guilt faded though. "It's not curfew!" He pulled on his wrist, but Lan Zhan was back in Nightless City reliving the time when he *had* let go. Nothing could make him release his grip at that moment.

"Wei Ying," he said instead of all the things crowding each other in his throat.

"There's nothing in the rules that say I can't be on the rooftops." Wei Ying tried again. Lan Zhan could see the suspicion blooming in his eyes and he could even understand why Wei Ying was fighting it. The prospect was objectively terrifying.

They were together again.

"Come away from the edge," Lan Zhan rasped and pulled Wei Ying closer, terrified his heart was showing on his face. "Don't make me watch you fall twice."

The fight drained out of Wei Ying then and a painful smile spread across his face. "Don't look at me like that, Lan Zhan," he said softly. "It was different then."

"Was it?" Lan Zhan wasn't sure he agreed. Stripped of all pretences, Wei Ying had that same look about him that had stuck to him the streets of Yiling like a clinging vine despite the way he tried to let his good humor show through.

Lan Zhan hadn't known it for what it was back then, but in the years since he'd seen that tense smile on the face of too many dying men and women who knew they were headed towards their end and were resolved to make the most of whatever time remained to them.

*'Never again,'* he told himself. *'Never ever again.'*

“Shijie’s here.” Wei Ying covered Lan Zhan’s with his own. “Jiang Cheng too. Lotus Pier isn’t burned. Wen Qing and Wen Ning are safe for now. Why would I fall?”

It was no surprise that Lan Zhan himself did not feature prominently on that list. He already knew that he alone was not enough to make Wei Ying stay.

“Come down anyway," he said and was grateful when Wei Ying did.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

LWJ gets a cute date.

...for a given value of 'cute' and also a given value of 'date.'

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

They went to the Jingshi because the guest houses were built to transmit sound so hardworking disciplinarians didn't have to work hard to find evidence of illicit parties or fights. It was close to hai hour, but given this recent revelation Lan Zhan hardly minded letting Wei Ying stay the night. Letting the man out of his sight would have been a harder request to grant.

Wei Ying looked around in appreciation as Lan Zhan lit the candles and lanterns. An odd, but not unpleasant feeling filled him at the sight of his zhiji's clear approbation.

"I should have known your house would be beautiful," he commented with the sort of gentle kindness that Lan Zhan had only really started to notice in him once they were both into their twenties, mostly when he saw Wei Ying interact with A-Yuan.

"Should you have?" Lan Zhan asked, kneeling at his tea table to make a pot. He did not anticipate that he'd sleep well or at all that night.

"Everything about you is beautiful." Wei Ying replied absently, like it cost him nothing to admit, while he examined one of Lan Zhan's paintings. He took himself away, twirling his flute in one hand as he sat down opposite Lan Zhan. "How long have you been aware?"

Lan Zhan took a moment to examine the dizi in Wei Wuxian's hand. It was just a flute and one he must have made recently; it was still bright green and unaged with slight splintering on the ends from where it had been cut from the stand.

Wei Ying must have harvested it himself once he became aware of his memories from the future. There was no odor of demonic cultivation about him. Suibian lay on the ground at his side where it belonged and not 'forgotten' in his bedroom or wherever he hid it back in those days.

Lan Zhan was offended by the flute's mere existence, much less its presence in the hands of a musician like Wei Ying. He sat on that opinion, recognizing its breed and the sort of thoughts that would follow it if he entertained it.

"The day you fell asleep in the library." Lan Zhan replied, pausing over his jars of tea. It was difficult sometimes to be confronted by the things he didn't know about Wei Ying, but had



wanted to. Lan Zhan quietly selected his own preferred white tea and consoled himself that, if nothing else, his guest had no issues stating his likes and dislikes. “Shortly before the tutoring sessions began.”

“That time when you let me sleep. That was when I arrived too.” Wei Ying mused, leaning back on one hand and tapping the bridge of his nose thoughtfully with the other. “Are you the reason Wen Qing is suddenly interested in class? And Meng Yao?”

No wonder he’d run out of the library like hell was chasing after.

“No.” Lan Zhan lit the little brazier he kept for making tea and went to fetch water for heating. “Meng-gongzi is here at Nie-er-gongzi’s request. There was an incident with their escort and he seems to want to keep his brother’s assistant close by as a result.”

“Huh.” Wei Wuxian made a noise that oddly echoed the feeling Lan Zhan had had when Xichen shared that intelligence with him. “Sounds out of character. They’ll both need watching.” His gaze drifted slowly toward Lan Zhan. “Are *you* the one who did this?” He made a vague gesture encompassing their entire situation.

“No.” Lan Zhan shook his head. He’d been rather hoping, knowing that he wasn’t alone, that *Wei Ying* was. “You are the only person I know who might be capable of such a thing.”

“Well, that’s underestimating some of the greatest minds of our time.” Wei Ying chuckled, sounding far too old for the body he wore.

Having him alone in the Jingshi was a mistake. An unworthy part of Lan Zhan had mistaken it for some kind of poorly defined permission. He had to close his hands in his lap to keep himself from reaching out to smooth the wrinkle in between Wei Ying’s brows.

“However, I agree. I’m the only bastard we know crazy enough to come up with something like this, much less actually attempt it. I didn’t, but I *might* have tried if left alone for long enough. Well, now I have part of an explanation for why I haven’t been seeing Wen Qing in the back hills. Someone is changing things.”

“Mn.” Lan Zhan nodded, unhappily reminded of the issue of the Yin Iron. “Can you destroy it?”

Wei Ying nodded. He didn’t Lan Zhan to elaborate on what ‘it’ was. “Yes,” he sighed. “It’ll be difficult and dangerous, but I can do it. I’ll need a better flute.” He held up the sad example he’d arrived with. “Even Chenqing was barely enough to do the job when I destroyed half the Stygian Tiger Amulet.”

Xichen and Nie Mingjue had managed to destroy three pieces between them so Liebing must have been sufficient to the task. Masterwork instruments of that quality capable of spiritual cultivation weren’t exactly plentiful, but if they could find or have one made then it would be in the Cloud Recesses.

Wei Ying had made Chenqing himself insofar as Lan Zhan knew. It was not an impossible task.

"A starting point, then," he agreed.

If this was real then war was inching towards their borders. Soon it would be upon them.

The gong sounded for hai hour and Wei Ying winced. "*Aiyah*," he sighed. "I wasn't thinking. Who's monitoring the guest quarter tonight? Maybe I can sneak past."

Lan Zhan touched the iron kettle to see if he could feel the faint tremors of boiling water inside. Not yet. "I expected to host you, given the late hour."

"Lan Zhan is too good," Wei Ying chuckled and cocked his head to consider him. "Why are you here?" He asked at last.

There was a weight to his tone that told Lan Zhan that Wei Ying had made one *very* important connection between the identities of everyone they'd identified as someone whose spiritual cognition had possibly been returned to their shared past.

They were all dead.

"Unimportant." Lan Zhan tested the kettle again and, having found it had reached a boil, began to prepare the nicer of his two celadon pots.

"*Lan Zhan*." Wei Ying's dismayed tone was almost worse than admitting the truth.

It was... not that Lan Zhan hadn't considered just *not* continuing on in the wake of Wei Ying's death.

The thought had occurred to him several times, especially during the long hours of his time reflecting in Cold Water Cave. He'd never entertained it as a serious possibility. He'd had A-Yuan. He'd had the memory of his promise to live as Wei Ying wanted to; in righteousness and without regret.

He'd also had a less noble anger simmering inside him spurring him on at all times. While his strength might wax and wane, his spite never did.

He would have never ended his own life, but when the end came anyway... he hadn't exactly turned away from it, had he? He'd leaned in and welcomed its cold embrace.

"There was a night hunt." Lan Zhan admitted, afraid of what Wei Ying might think if he continued to delay. "I was unlucky and alone. That was all."

"I'm sorry." Wei Ying was quiet for a while. "Lan Zhan should never be alone."

Lan Zhan did not say '*you're the only one aside from Xichen who thinks so.*' Instead he said, "Mn."

Of course Wei Ying would. That was why.

"Lan Zhan..." He rocked from side to side, losing a bit of his fake show of good manners. "...how did you know it was me?"

Lan Zhan thought he'd rather die again than explain it. "Think about it," he said instead, which he knew was a frustrating answer, but Wei Ying had seen him at his worst and most petulant self and still seemed to want his attention anyway. He could relax that much in this company.

He poured them tea and covertly watched Wei Ying breathe in the tea's fragrance, sip it once like he would wine, hold it in his mouth, and then swallow with a pleased smile. He tossed the rest back in one drink. "Careful, Lan Zhan. I never get tea this good. I might force you to keep making it for me."

Wei Ying leaned in the way he did when he was deliberately trying to make Lan Zhan retreat. For once, Lan Zhan didn't feel the need to. It had been too long since he'd had someone willing to press his boundaries like this. He was too aware of the ephemeral nature of relationships and time.

He, quite plainly, *wanted* it too badly.

"I will." It was a nothing promise, but Lan Zhan liked the feeling of making it. The idea of being taken up on it -not just once, but always- was tantalizing. No one demanded anything of Lan Zhan the way Wei Ying did; without real expectation. It made him want to provide.

He'd felt that way in his previous life too. The feeling came to a head and almost escaped his control when he found Wei Ying slowly starving in the Burial Mounds.

Lan Zhan had sometimes entertained a very specific vision of what would happen if the impossible came to pass and Wei Ying gave himself into Lan Zhan's protection. It was *mortifyingly* domestic. If Cloud Recesses failed to shelter them he'd find the furthest corner of the earth to go to ground in. There, in quiet, they'd live.

In retrospect, he should have done it anyway. If he'd found a way to bring the Wens then Wei Ying would have let Lan Zhan take him anywhere, but Lan Zhan hadn't been ready at the time to let the ends justify his means.

Wei Ying's presence in the Jingshi overlapped that hazy-edged fantasy; him accepting tea from Lan Zhan's hand and them admiring the serene garden together.

Their discussion of death and the Yin Iron spoiled it just enough to make it *real* and Lan Zhan found himself wanting what he'd received over what he'd imagined.

Wei Ying gave a startled laugh and was the one to back off. "I warned you!" He said, holding out his cup for more. Lan Zhan was happy to pour and ignored the dark little thing inside him that *liked* the way Wei Ying had flinched first.

There was a soft tap at the sliding door that opened onto the porched seconds before Xichen let himself in, looking pinched. "Wangji, I'm sorry to disturb you. Wei-gongzi didn't..." He paused, taking in the scene before him. "... *oh*, I *see*. Forgive me. I've interrupted."

The set of his brows said that Lan Zhan would be hearing about this again later --and again and again and again.

“Forgive me, Zewu-jun. I lost track of time.” Wei Ying was a much better liar under these circumstances. He saluted, holding his flute like he normally would his sword. “We were discussing music.”

“You play?” Xichen seemed reluctantly interested and Lan Zhan would not be the first person to have an unexpected overnight guest just because they’d missed curfew.

He gracefully did not call Lan Zhan out on the fact that as the discipline master he was permitted to escort people back to their rooms at his discretion. Xichen would know that if Wei Ying was stuck in the Jingshi then it could only happen if Lan Zhan *wanted* him there.

His eyes followed the flute in Wei Ying’s hand. “Were you the one playing earlier? Shufu and I caught some of your performance.”

“It was,” Lan Zhan cut in before Wei Ying could deny it.

“Exquisite!” Xichen knelt at the table, *very* sure of his welcome, and accepted a cup of tea from Lan Zhan. “What was that last song you played? I’m unfamiliar with it.”

“Oh, I...” Wei Ying’s gaze slid towards Lan Zhan as the realization hit. Damn it. “...don’t think I ever heard the name of it. Lan-er-gongzi, this unworthy one understands now. Please take pity and answer the question for Zewu-jun?” He favored Lan Zhan with a set of puppy-dog eyes that, if his brother weren’t present, might have broken him.

“You have,” Lan Zhan replied flatly and drank his tea.

“I have?” Wei Ying leaned forward, brow crinkled. “When?”

“Think about it,” Lan Zhan told him again, unwilling to be persuaded or say the word ‘Wangxian’ in front of his brother.

Xichen watched their exchange with inappropriate delight. Wei Ying didn’t notice, but Lan Zhan was better versed in his brother’s face.

“So cruel!” Wei Ying cried, mostly for the comedic effect. “So cruel to me, Ha...” he caught himself. “...Lan-er-gongzi!”

“Mn,” Lan Zhan agreed mildly, unable to fight the slight tug at the corner of his mouth. He was unbearably fond of Wei Ying’s theatrics, having been denied them for so long.

Xichen’s arrival put a stop to their serious conversation and, worse, he kindly escorted Wei Ying back to his guest house after a short while.

Lan Zhan’s heart walked out into the night with them, but he reconciled himself to the loss. He’d discovered that what he remembered being a side guest room had actually started as a storage area for old books and musical supplies. Lan Zhan had only converted it to a bedroom once A-Yuan was old enough to sleep by himself and called it a guest room afterwards even though, really, it was still Sizhui’s room.

A better man would not have later pictured what might have happened that evening with one bed between them if his brother hadn't come so fortuitously by, but Lan Zhan had never been as good a person as Wei Ying told him he was.

---

Consequences arrived swiftly.

"I will be taking over Meng-gongzi's tutorials," Xichen announced before breakfast. Their uncle's disgruntled expression said he knew of this already. "In recognition of his assistance and the fact that there have been no repeat offenses, Wei-gongzi will be released from his punishment detail."

Lan Zhan's stomach sank. This would be the end of their afternoons together.

He trusted that Wei Ying would manufacture an excuse to see him again, but it wouldn't be as frequent and it wouldn't be easy.

Lan Zhan's duties expanded to fill all his time. He had a responsibility to his sect and, moreover, the need to maintain his cover as a dedicated young master until he and Wei Ying came to a decision about how to proceed. He had no reason to continue to meet with Wei Ying unless they manufactured one.

"You're unhappy," Xichen observed.

"I accept xiongzhang's decision," Lan Zhan replied, which Xichen correctly interpreted as not being a 'no.'

"Wangji," Xichen sighed before he exchanged a look with their uncle, who just sighed and looked resigned, and clarified. "You are now free to make plans to meet with your friend without a conflict of authority or him running the risk of breaking curfew. Uncle and I have agreed to give you a break from your responsibilities as chief disciplinarian during the guest lectures."

His expression went a little guilty and his eyes strayed to his plates even though they'd already discussed this once already. "It was unfair to place you in such a position just now. This is the time when the young masters and mistresses of the Great Sects have an opportunity to build friendships outside their own families and retainers. We nearly robbed you of that chance without proper thought. Go make friends. This is your time as well."

It had felt like trust at the time, but Lan Zhan did not disagree. He was too aware of his own deficiencies.

"I'll let you give Wei-gongzi the good news yourself." Xichen returned his attention to Lan Zhan's face. "Also, Uncle has granted Wei-gongzi permission to study musical cultivation in his spare time and if he is so interested." His smile broadened. "I wonder where I might find a willing tutor for him?"

Lan Zhan gave his brother a scathing look that only made Xichen laugh. Then he turned to his uncle and bowed. "Thank you, shufu, for your consideration."

Lan Qiren turned his head, which did nothing to hide the bloom of red spreading up from his earlobes. “It’s only a shame that talent is wasted on *Jiang*,” he grumbled, stroking his beard. That was, perhaps, very typical of his uncle. There were very few chinks in the stony armor on his heart, but the next largest one after *family* was named *music*. “His mother couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket and I don’t think I ever heard his father use more than three words at the same time. It’s a mystery where he got it from.”

He harumphed his displeasure with the general state of the universe and began to pointedly eat, ending the conversation by beginning the meal.

Lan Zhan did not go straight to Wei Ying’s side although he wanted to. It was a day of rest so Wei Ying would not report directly to the library, nor would Meng Yao.

He had another destination; the craftsmans’ quarter. Lan Zhan had been considering the issue of replacing Chenqing well into his restless night and had come up with some tentative ideas that only partially involved never having to look upon the bamboo insult Wei Ying currently carried ever again. Even Xichen had been shooting it pained looks the night before.

Lan Yibo was the senior flutemaker in Cloud Recesses. He was the craftsman who made *Liebing*. His projects were less ambitious in his later years, but always exquisite. If there was anyone alive who could make a first class spiritual tool capable of contending with the Yin Iron then it would be him

Lan Zhan rarely traded on his rank, but there wouldn’t be many opportunities to do it later.

He was fortunate. Lan Yibo chose to receive him despite the fact that he could have refused and even heard him out.

“A dizi?” He sounded skeptical, but cautiously receptive. “The xiao has better pitch for spellworking.”

“He already plays the dizi.” Lan Zhan did not care to take the time to teach Wei Ying an entirely new instrument at the same time as traditional Lan cultivation; not when they were so pressed for time.

Also he had not ever noticed any deficiencies in Wei Ying’s playing as opposed to Xichen’s. This was, perhaps, just the elder’s personal opinion.

“*Him*, ha?” Lan Yibo squinted at Lan Zhan over his work table. “Not for the second young master? Well, in that case it’ll be up to *him* whether or not it becomes a first class spiritual tool. *You* could nurture an instrument, but not everyone has the qi reserves and strength of personality. I’ll need to meet this young man and hear him play. Then I’ll say whether or not it can be done.”

“Thank you, Qianbei.” Lan Zhan had no doubt it could be. He saluted and left to find Wei Ying.

He found his *zhiji* in the second place he looked; fishing for slippery silver perch in the river. Wei Ying was alone for once and had already caught a few. Lan Zhan spotted his catch on a

string in the river shallows. There were three of them, and Lan Zhan surmised he was catching a little supplementary breakfast for the people in his circle. If Wei Ying had been fishing only for himself, he'd have already started a fire.

Lan Zhan almost wished he had. Intellectually, he knew the guest houses were well stocked and Jiang Yanli would no more let her brothers leave in the morning without making certain they'd been fed than she'd raise her voice to a stranger. Emotionally, he knew he would likely struggle with the need to know Wei Ying was eating regular meals for a while.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying stood up and waved. He squinted up at the sun to gauge its position. "Am I late?" He asked.

Lan Zhan only shook his head and found a place near the little impromptu cook fire waiting on the river bank. Suibian was leaned against one large rock. Lan Zhan took another near it and turned to watch Wei Ying.

"Do you want to come in?" Wei Ying made an inviting picture. His trousers were rucked up to the knee exposing his tanned calves and he'd tied his sleeves back all the way up to the elbow, leaving his toned forearms bare to the morning sun.

Lan Zhan shook his head again. "Finish," he said. "We may talk when you cook your catch."

Wei Ying's smile turned a little wistful. "You're not going to tell me off for eating meat in Cloud Recesses?"

There'd been a store of illicit alcohol living under Lan Zhan's floorboards in the Jingshi for over a decade before Lan Zhan's death. He didn't care about a couple of fish. Knowing that this was *his* Wei Ying, that they shared the same memories and losses, only made him *more* inclined towards indulging the man, not less.

"No."

He watched Wei Ying catch two more fish before wading over to the shallows to dispatch his catch, clean them, and thread them onto prepared skewers.

"I have spoken to someone who might make a flute for you," Lan Zhan said as they watched the fish roast.

Wei Ying blinked at him. "That was fast!" He frowned. "Lan Zhan, I don't really have money for that."

"I do." Lan Zhan looked away. He had his own income as the second young master of Lan. He worked hard and spent little and was also *intensely invested* in *not* losing Wei Ying *twice*. He'd go into debt without a care in the world if he thought it would make even the slightest difference.

"Lan Zhan." Wei Ying craned over so he could meet Lan Zhan's gaze. His gray eyes were too serious for such a young face. "Whatever you think you owe me, you don't."

Didn't he? Lan Zhan didn't bother pursuing that line of inquiry. Only he knew what he could have done, but chose not to.

Wei Ying reached out and grasped him by the arm. "Everything that happened, *none* of it was because of you. What I did..." he swallowed, "... it was all my choice; my own arrogance. *My* failures."

Lan Zhan shot him an unamused look and swept his sleeve away. "Would you do it differently?"

Wei Ying winced and shrugged one shoulder. "Some of it," he admitted. "I should have looked for Wen Qing and Wen Ning earlier to make sure they were alright. I owed them more than you can imagine and I just *forgot* about them until I met her again starving in the street. It would have been different if we weren't racing to find Wen Ning before it was too late."

The idea of Jiang-zongzhu, much less any of the other sects, letting the Yiling Laozu go haring off to look for a few Wen refugees was ludicrous. LanlingJin alone would have been screaming about it in the streets and would have used it to justify finally making Jiang-zongzhu hand over the Stygian Tiger Amulet, but Wei Ying wouldn't have appreciated that observation so Lan Zhan kept it to himself.

Events might have unfolded worse than they originally did if Wei Ying hadn't kept himself quietly in Lotus Pier for as long as he did. It was hard to make an argument that he was a growing threat when anyone who passed through Yunmeng could see his leisurely carousing. He hadn't presented a threat to anything except Jiang Wanyin's wallet.

Lan Zhan stayed out of sight as Wei Ying distributed his gleanings among his siblings, Nie-er-gongzi, and Meng Yao before he led Wei Ying away in the direction of the craftsman's quarter. Wei Ying peered around in fascination as they walked. He'd been in plenty of places where guests were forbidden to go, but not this one.

It was messier than the rest of Cloud Recesses by necessity. Here was where they made roof tiles and guqin, side by side. There was a reason all the workshops were cordoned off by a tall wall and concealing trees.

Lan Yibo was still in his shop when they arrived. He watched them approach with keen brown eyes and waved Wei Ying inside.

"I hope Lan-er-gongzi will not mind waiting outside." He bowed in apology, but Lan Zhan shook his head. He did not mind boredom, usually.

He minded it this time, though, when Wei Ying later emerged crestfallen from the workshop's cool interior followed by an equally unhappy elder.

"I cannot." Lan Yibo held out his hands, which had been busy doing something all the times they'd spoken earlier so Lan Zhan had not noticed the fine tremors in them or his swollen joints. "I apologize, Lan-er-gongzi. You're correct. This young man does need a superior tool, but for something like that I would need to do all the work from start to finish. My best days are behind me now. These days I must rely on my apprentices to do the initial turning



and final polishing. I don't know of any living craftsman who could make what your young friend needs. You'll need to find an existing flute and I don't know where you should start looking. I would suggest starting with your uncle."

That was the worst idea Lan Zhan could imagine, but he did not let it show on his face.

Wei Ying waited until they were alone and walking back towards the guest quarter. "I can make something." He was trying to reassure Lan Zhan. "I made Chenqing. I can make another. I just need to find the right materials. It'll be alright." He bumped his shoulder gently into Lan Zhan's. "Don't look so down."

"I do not." Lan Zhan was not 'down.' He was regrouping. If Lan Yibo did not know of another flutemaker of his caliber then it didn't necessarily mean one didn't exist. Lan sect, like all other sects, tended to only look inward. He would need to make inquiries. "I will walk you back to your rooms."

"Ah." Wei Ying chuckled. "Such a gentleman. This Yiling Laozu is overwhelmed by Hanguang-jun's gentility!"

"Noisy." Lan Zhan replied without heat.

"Try that again." Wei Ying snorted. "You didn't sound like you mind."

"I don't."

That *did* silence Wei Ying, which Lan Zhan hadn't wanted. He'd wanted something like the camaraderie they'd found on the road together. Maybe that had been asking for too much, considering all that came after.

They walked quietly all the way to the Jiang guest houses.

"Lan Zhan..." Wei Ying gave him a half smile before shaking his head at himself. "...I'll see you in class."

Lan Zhan nodded and made himself watch his zhiji go.

The door didn't quite close behind Wei Ying's back so Lan Zhan didn't miss it when he froze just inside his room. It was the kind of stillness he recognized from a hundred night hunts and an entire war.

Something was wrong.

"Lan Zhan." Wei Ying took a step towards his bed and Lan Zhan took it as permission to enter.

The room was neater than he remembered Demon Subdue Palace being, but then Wei Ying wouldn't have had the time for his mad tinkering and room checks happened frequently. Cleanliness was not monitored like curfew or dietary restrictions, but the disciplinarians did keep an eye on it.

Wei Ying's bed lay in the sunlight of an open window shaded only slightly by a young tree, which he vaguely wished he had not learned. The picture of his zhiji blinking slowly awake in the sunlight was going to visit him again later when he had fewer defenses against it, but for the moment Lan Zhan was more concerned with the red jade dizi laying on the mattress. There was a note next to it that just read 'Xiaodan.'

### *Little Dawn.*

The name was appropriate. The flute was an odd shade of pinkish red marbled with grayish white and streaks of lavender that made it look uncannily like a sunrise viewed through wispy clouds.

There was no question that it was a powerful and masterless spiritual tool. Lan Zhan could feel its presence from where he stood. There was just enough pressure emanating from it that he could tell it wouldn't take kindly to his touch and wanted him to stay away. Wei Ying, meanwhile, drifted forward like he was being gently tugged in.

*This* at least was familiar. Lan Zhan had felt something similar when his uncle sat both him and his brother down in front of Wangji to figure out who would eventually inherit it once their father gave up the pretence that he would ever emerge from seclusion.

Even so, he caught Wei Ying by the arm before he could succumb to the lure of what was apparently a very compatible tool. "Wait. We don't know who left it."

"We know a little bit," Wei Ying muttered. His eyes were glued to the flute and Lan Zhan could tell he wanted it almost as it seemed to want him. "Someone, probably whoever's responsible for all this, knows that I'll need a flute."

That had also occurred to Lan Zhan. The tool didn't feel malicious. They rarely did. Even Zidian -when not in use or agitated by its owner's bloodlust- had a fairly innocuous spiritual presence despite the fact that it was the nastiest object Lan Zhan had ever encountered short of the Stygian Tiger Amulet itself.

If their mysterious benefactor was the same person who was responsible for clawing them back from the dead then they had no real reason to believe that person meant to hurt them, but it was hard to trust anyone he'd never met who clearly wanted something from him, from Wei Ying.

Wei Ying started forward again and Lan Zhan made himself let go. This didn't feel like it was happening out of necessity and despite the danger, it was impossible to deny Wei Ying anything that made him look like that.

The invisible pressure eased as Wei Ying lifted the flute and ran his fingers across the surface. With nothing keeping him from getting closer, Lan Zhan was able to see that the instrument had realistic scudding clouds embossed across its surface and inlaid with little black jade birds in flight. It was every bit as much a piece of artwork as it was a powerful tool.

Wei Ying blew a few exploratory notes on Xiaodan and was rewarded by the flute's mellow voice. It was a bit deeper than Chenqing, but had a higher range than Liebing.

The utterly charmed smile on Wei Ying's face in addition to the fact that Xiaodan was no longer trying to hold Lan Zhan at a distance told him, almost as much as the quality of the music and the undirected power in it, that the tool had accepted Wei Ying as its master.

Wei Ying lifted the note off his bed and smiled to himself. He tilted it in Lan Zhan's direction. It hadn't been signed, but that was no surprise. "Their calligraphy is almost as good as yours," he observed.

It was. The writer was not as precise as Lan Zhan himself was, but wrote with a slight artistic flair.

"Mn." Lan Zhan agreed and tried not to be annoyed as Wei Ying put the note carefully away.

Wei Ying turned back to him with a different kind of smile; one that promised mischief. "Want to go take our windfall out for a test?" He asked.

Lan Zhan's mouth quirked slightly without his meaning to. "Of course."

What other answer would he *ever* give?

---

There was a roster in the Hall of Duty where a selection of low priority night hunt targets were kept available for whoever was free or for junior disciples looking for extra practice. Lan Zhan usually received his assignments directly from his brother. He was well past the point of needing to use the roster, but usually took anything that had been hanging around too long or was more challenging than might be appropriate for one of his junior sect siblings.

Wei Ying was waiting for him at the gate, changed out of his guest whites and into a dark blue coat over red robes that made him look like the Yiling Laozu --only softer.

"You find us anything good?" Wei Ying asked and Lan Zhan nodded an affirmative.

It was, in fact, another mutated boar. Given its location it might even be the *same* mutated boar, just younger. Warped creatures often lived unnaturally long lives and it had killed several cultivators plus even more travellers before Xichen sent Lan Zhan after it.

He bore it no ill will, but at the same time he knew it needed to die.

The trip took them outside of Caiyi. They travelled by sword, given it was just the two of them and they both had enough cultivation to both fly and then fight afterward although they might end up having to walk back.

Even so, it was an embarrassingly short hunt. Skill often mattered more than brute force in these things. Lan Zhan and Wei Wuxian had both. It only went on as long as it did because Wei Ying was experimenting and basically playing with his food.

He wasn't using resentful energy, which confused Lan Zhan. He'd been prepared to overlook it and just play Cleansing afterwards. This part *was* about necessity, but Wei Ying no longer seemed interested in fighting him over the harmful effects of demonic cultivation.

Eventually Wei Ying tired of toying with their prey and played a powerful note on Xiaodan that paralyzed the boar long enough for Lan Zhan to take its head off.

It was still afternoon when they finished disposing of the corpse and they made their way back to Caiyi with plenty of time to return to Cloud Recesses before anyone would be looking for them. They had, however, missed lunch.

Lan Zhan noted the gurgle of an unhappy stomach at his side while they walked past several stalls selling street food. Wei Ying didn't say anything. In fact he pretended not to have noticed and pointed at a stall selling ugly masks. Lan Zhan used his distraction to buy some skewers and held the one that had been rolled in lao gan ma under Wei Ying's nose until he realized there was food.

The reaction was exactly as he'd hoped.

Wei Ying lit up like a candle. "For me?" He took it at Lan Zhan's nod. "Lan-er-gege is too good," he chuckled and bit into it.

They walked back towards Cloud Recesses. If money changed hands and a few bottles of Emperor's Smile found their way into Wei Ying's sleeve, all Lan Zhan cared about was him being careful enough to not to get caught with it.

His uncle had warmed considerably to the idea of Wei Wuxian, understimulated musical cultivation prodigy, over Wei Wuxian, shiftless troublemaker, and any setbacks on that front would be annoying.

"Do not share that with Jiang Wanyin" was all he said.

Wei Ying considered him. "You've been giving Jiang Cheng some heavy looks," he observed. "What happened between you two?"

'*You*' Lan Zhan did not say.

That was the heart of it, but he also didn't want to have to detail for Wei Ying just how Jiang-zongzhu ascended from being a petulant brat to an unhinged maniac after Wei Ying's death.

He was fine, for a given value of 'fine', until someone mentioned the name 'Wei Wuxian' within his hearing and then he'd all but start foaming at the mouth. Moreover he'd passed that mania on to his nephew.

"He'll get you caught. Nie-er-gongzi as well," he said instead.

Wei Ying shrugged his lukewarm agreement. "I don't really drink in company anymore," he said and then wagged his brows. "Unless Lan Zhan wants to drink with me. Then I'll take company."

Lan Zhan reflected on the blank space that represented his sole experience with drinking by himself along with all the horrific stories he'd heard about himself afterwards. It hadn't been so bad the time Wei Ying gave him a cup of wine, but he suspected it was because his younger drunken self had no interest in leaving Wei Ying's side. It had probably been a nicer experience despite the fact that he couldn't recall that time either.

"Unwise," he replied.

"Maybe," Wei Ying chuckled. "Aiyah, your tolerance was so bad at this age. Did you even get any better at it? Or did Zewu-jun have to teach you his trick for burning it off?"

Lan Zhan stopped and stared at him. "What *trick*?" he asked. His brother knew of such a thing and never shared? Not even after Lan Zhan had broken into the storehouses, scared the living daylights out of all their sect brothers and sisters, and then later *branded* himself?

"I asked him once and he said he used his golden core to burn it off." Wei Ying came back to join him. "It might not work on you," he added thoughtfully. "You went down fast the time we drank together. I don't think you'd have time to try anything and spellcasting while drunk is a bad idea; occasionally *hilarious*, but bad in general."

That --was probably true.

The thing was, he wanted to do it again. Now that he was thinking about it, Lan Zhan was certain the difference between his first experience and his last was Wei Ying there taking care of him.

He *wanted* that.

"Something to experiment with, then," he said, which was as close to as 'yes please' as he could go in their current setting. "Outside of Cloud Recesses."

"I remember the bastinado just fine." Wei Ying shuddered theatrically. "We don't need to be reacquainted."

"Then remember that when you hide your wine." Lan Zhan started walking again, leaving a laughing Wei Ying to catch up.

---

As he'd halfway expected to, Lan Zhan found a mellow and tipsy Wei Ying alone in his guest house during room checks that night. He was laying on the floor playing a lullaby on Xiaodan with no evidence of his wine anywhere nearby; certainly no noisy guests or a mess of peanut shells on the table.

"You should sleep," he observed, looking down at Wei Ying who returned the attention with a vague smile. "Drink water."

"Lan-er-gege is so nice to me now," Wei Ying mused and Lan Zhan amended his assessment from 'tipsy' to 'slightly drunk.' It wasn't more than that. He'd seen Wei Ying drink far more than two small bottles of a very mild wine and still pass as sober. "Why?"

“Why not?” Lan Zhan carefully knelt and laid Bichen to the side. He’d saved Wei Ying’s room for last, knowing he wouldn’t be able to resist staying if his zhiji was awake and feeling chatty.

Wei Ying’s smile faded. “You know why,” he said quietly, looking away. Ah, he was maudlin. Wei Ying had been a cheerful drunk the times Lan Zhan had been around to see it, but he also knew there’d been a time when Wei Ying was medicating with alcohol rather than drinking to enjoy it even though he personally didn’t know all the reasons why. The horrors of war had seemed as good an answer as any, but Lan Zhan had always wondered if there was something he’d missed.

Just because Wei Ying was young again didn’t mean his relationship with wine had gone back to what it had been. No wonder he hadn’t invited his brother and friends in for a party.

“I do not.” Lan Zhan wasn’t about to confirm whatever dark thoughts Wei Ying was entertaining.

As much as he abhorred the killing at Nightless City, he still wasn’t sure what else Wei Ying ought to have done or what alternatives had been available to him after he broke with Jiang to retreat with the Dafan Wen.

The sects instantly lost interest in the Yiling Laozu and turned on each other the second they had an opportunity to claim Stygian Tiger Amulet for themselves so it was clear that moral outrage played no real part in their reasons for persecuting him before that. It was just one of the very elaborate stories they told each other and altered on the fly to justify whatever actions served them best.

Wei Ying huffed a small laugh. “I don’t know what to do, Lan Zhan,” he confessed quietly. “What if it all goes wrong again?”

There were many things Lan Zhan could have said and meant. ‘I won’t let it’, for one. It was too raw a statement. It would reveal too much. He was thoughtfully quiet for a moment and then suggested, “Dongying?”

That got him a laugh. “Not sure how we’d get that many people on the boat.” Wei Ying chuckled.

“It’s time for rest.” Lan Zhan decided he’d let this go on long enough and slid his hand under Wei Ying’s back to help him sit up. He was reassuringly heavy.

“Why do you touch me now?” Wei Ying wanted to know. He was blinking sleepily; a sure precursor to drowsing off. “You never used to.”

He’d used to be a fool. “We’re not strangers.”

“No.” Wei Ying listed forward and his face landed against Lan Zhan’s shoulder. He stayed there for three perfect heartbeats, breathing softly against Lan Zhan’s throat before pushing back. “You’re right. I need... I need to sleep.”

“Come.” Lan Zhan escorted him to the bed and watched him lay down. “Sleep well, Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying graced him with a sleepy smile before his eyes slid shut. “You too, Lan Zhan.”

Lan Zhan blew out the candles and made himself leave.

## Chapter End Notes

Conversations I had while writing this fic:

Roommate, betaing: ...did you name the flute maker after freaking Wang Yibo?

Me: Look, names are hard!

Also Me: ....and it's funny!

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan Zhan wondered briefly the following morning if their outing the day before had been noticed.

Going by the look of simmering resentment on Jiang Wanyin's face as he seethed at his desk, it had been. His glare seemed to be split evenly between Wei Ying and Lan Zhan himself.

Given the way he had reacted to being left behind during Lan Zhan and Wei Ying's search for the Yin Iron in the previous life, Lan Zhan probably should have expected this result.

Jiang Wanyin, however, was not the one who found him after class was released for the afternoon break, however.

No, *he* went straight after Wei Ying and dragged him off by the neck. Jiang Yanli followed at a most decorous pace, chuckling into her fist, so Lan Zhan allowed them their family time.

Wen Qing was the one to place herself right in Lan Zhan's path as soon as Wei Ying was out of sight.

"Lan-er-gongzi," she greeted him with icy politeness. "A moment of your time?"

He nodded and allowed her to take him away to one of the more secluded gardens near the lecture hall. Everyone had dispersed to go eat or play elsewhere. They wouldn't be disturbed.

"What are you doing?" she hissed as soon as she was certain they were alone.

"In what regard?" Lan Zhan asked. Unlike Wei Ying, he had no strong feelings regarding Wen-guniang. He respected her abilities and at one point he'd been seethingly jealous of her until he realized Wei Ying truly *didn't* have romantic feelings for her and their relationship was closer to that of siblings.

"You're not subtle." She replied coolly. "Do you think befriending him now will make him more likely to listen to you when the time comes?"

He felt what little regard he had for her start to cool and he gave up the act. "Do you suggest needles instead?"

She flinched *hard* and like that Lan Zhan had his answer as to why it took Wei Ying so long to arrive after the executions.

"If necessary." Wen Qing replied. "Leave him be, Lan-er-gongzi. Didn't you already do enough? I haven't forgotten whose letter walked him and my brother into that ambush."

He'd probably deserved that. "Neither has Wei Ying," he replied.



Wen Qing sucked in her breath, stricken.

“We only figured each other out recently.” Lan Zhan continued. Wei Ying had loved this woman as a sister. “I have not told him that I noticed you. He died badly and his mental state is still delicate, but he suspects you.”

Her hands, folded neatly over her stomach tensed. “*How?*” Her voice dropped.

“I do not wish to speak of it.” Lan Zhan spoke with perfect honesty, but clarified the minimal and most relevant details in his mind for her. “Jiang Yanli was killed first. She took a blow meant for him.”

Wen Qing turned away, but her expression told Lan Zhan she knew what that would have meant for someone whose control was as delicate as Wei Ying’s was back in those days. Her resolve and expression firmed up before she turned to face him again.

“Would you bring him to me?” She asked.

“He’s with his family now.” Lan Zhan didn’t care about Jiang Wanyin, but Wei Ying wouldn’t come away from Jiang Yanli easily. “Your brother...” He hesitated, unsure how to phrase his question.

She shook her head. “No.” It was an entire volume of meaning crammed into one word. “I need to see him. Wei Wuxian. I was treating him before... everything. It was a spiritual malaise. We don’t know what came back with him.”

“He hasn’t been using resentful energy.” Lan Zhan defended him. Wei Ying had had the opportunity and chose not to. That meant something. He deserved credit for it.

Wen Qing considered him. “How much attention have you been paying to *yourself*?” She asked and then *tsked*. “Nevermind, I forgot how you two get when the other one is in the room. You haven’t given yourself a second thought. Do you think *that*...” there she pointed at Lan Zhan’s sternum, “... is a golden core a sixteen year old would have?”

Lan Zhan frowned and pressed a hand against his own chest, searching for the familiar presence inside him. It was as it had ever been; steady, warm, and bright. He could tell no difference between his core now and the moment he’d... ah.

He saw the issue.

Lan Zhan hadn’t noticed because there’d been no change in his spiritual power between his death and his revival. He hadn’t hit any unexpected boundaries that would have reminded him of what Wen-guniang had figured out on her own.

“It’s not just our spiritual cognition that was returned to these younger bodies.” She announced grimly. “It was our spiritual bodies as well, including our cores. *That’s* why I need to see Wei Wuxian.”

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Getting a hold of Wei Ying without his obnoxious sibling was easier said than done.

Jiang Wanyin seemed convinced that they'd run off on another night hunt if left unsupervised. He couched it in terms of embarrassing YunmengJiang, but really he was in the middle of a jealousy fit that even Lan Zhan could spot and diagnose.

He'd often wondered, after Wei Ying's death, if Jiang-zongzhu's obsession with his former brother's memory was really such a new thing. Now he had his answer.

It was *not* a new thing, but Lan Zhan couldn't figure out if Jiang Wanyin currently resented him for taking up so much of his brother's attention or if it was some other thorny tangle.

The dynamics between all three Jiang siblings were difficult to unravel and Lan Zhan wasn't inclined towards trying to understand Jiang Wanyin anyway. As far as he could figure, he'd never been forced to learn emotional regulation because his brother and sister would bend over backwards to accommodate him the instant he began to struggle. It might have been one thing if he recognized and acknowledged it, but he didn't.

Wei Ying slipped away to see him after lunch, letting himself into the Jingshi with a theatrical sigh. "Aiyah, Jiang Cheng was in a clingy mood today," he smiled at Lan Zhan and sprawled out on the floor by Lan Zhan's desk. "Shidi gets that way sometimes. It looked like you wanted something earlier?"

Lan Zhan nodded, wondering what his face had been doing all day. He *thought* he'd been patiently waiting for an opportunity when Jiang Wanyin was occupied to invite Wei Ying to the Wen guest house. "Wen-guniang approached me during the break," he admitted quietly, not liking the way Wei Ying locked up at the news.

"She..." He searched Lan Zhan's face. "...she's really?"

How could he say no?

Lan Zhan nodded. "I promised I would bring you to her guest house. She wants to see you."

"Lan Zhan, we..." Wei Ying shook himself. He hugged himself. "...we parted on such... I can't."

"She has concerns about potential side effects of our transitions." Now that he knew something really had been wrong with Wei Ying back in those days, something Wen-guniang had been treating, he couldn't back down. "Have you noticed?"

"Noticed what?" Wei Ying asked, still folded in on himself.

"My core is the same as it was when I was thirty five. I'm stronger than I was as a teenager." Lan Zhan admitted quietly. "Wen-guniang says that our old cores have somehow replaced the ones we had before."

Wei Ying covered his mouth and shook his head. "I..." He shook himself again. "...alright." He dropped his hands. "I don't think my case is like yours, but I'll let her see."

They went to find Wen Qing once afternoon classes were over.

The Wen guest houses were isolated from the others. No disciples from QishanWen or DafanWen had ever attended the lectures at Cloud Recesses so there was no student housing for them. Wen Qing and Wen Ning stayed in the buildings meant for visiting sect leaders and their retinues. It meant the Wen guest house was *very* private.

Wen Qing greeted Wei Ying by first slapping him and then hugging him. Lan Zhan stood back, alarmed, as they cried on each other and then immediately pretended they hadn't.

"Where's Wen Ning?" Wei Ying's voice was hoarse when he found it. "Is he...?"

"No." Wen Qing gave Wei Ying the same response Lan Zhan himself had gotten, but Wei Ying greeted it with relief.

"Oh thank goodness." He slumped over Wen Qing's tea table. "That's one small mercy. He shouldn't have to remember any of that."

"He shouldn't have to *live* it ever," Wen Qing agreed darkly and took two boxes of acupuncture needles out of her sleeves. "Shirt off."

Wei Ying crossed his arms over his chest, shy as any delicate maiden. "*Qing-jie!*"

She rolled her eyes. "There's nothing you have that I haven't seen or will ever care about, given all the times you've bled or vomited on me." She pointed towards the door and addressed Lan Zhan. "You. Out. If his brother or anyone else tries to come in or listen then get rid of them. You don't listen either."

Eyebrows raised, Lan Zhan obeyed. He was curious, but it looked like Wei Ying was about to willingly submit to medical treatment and he didn't want to jeopardize that miracle.

Lan Zhan was also not emotionally prepared to see Wei Ying take anything off. He went outside far enough that he couldn't hear the voices inside.

After a while -a good long while- Wen Qing opened the door and called him back inside. The treatment wasn't done. Wei Ying lay flat on the floor. His chest was a forest of golden needles that made it difficult for Lan Zhan to acknowledge the fact that his top layers were bunched around his waist leaving Wei Ying's torso bare. His eyes strained in Lan Zhan's direction and opened wide. "Wen Qing! That's not fair!"

The young doctor pointed at Wei Ying and said, "He is no longer allowed to drink wine or anything else that acts as a depressant." She informed Lan Zhan, deadly serious. "If his spirits drop for no good reason then he needs to see me or another doctor. Alcohol will mask and exacerbate the issue."

"Don't make this Lan Zhan's problem!" Wei Ying hissed from the floor. "Lan Zhan, ignore her."

Neither Wen Qing nor Lan Zhan acknowledged him.

"What may he have?" Lan Zhan asked.

“Tea.” Wen Qing thought about it. “Black tea if he’s just having a minor dip. All other types are fine. Sugar will help sometimes too, but in the event of a major episode of depression he’ll need medicine. I’ll write you a prescription.”

“Why are you giving it to *him*?” Wei Ying asked plaintively. “I’m your patient!”

“He’ll actually fill it and make you use it. You’ll just lose the scrip,” Wen Qing replied tartly. “I will write out instructions for a regular acupuncturist. He’ll need to have sessions more often than I can safely see him. Can you share them with his sister?”

*There* was a good idea.

Lan Zhan nodded and went to kneel next to Wei Ying with his eyes averted while Wen Qing began to write out the promised prescriptions. This close he could see that Wei Ying was sweating and breathing very, very carefully. Whatever this therapy was, it was not easy to endure.

She threw them both out once she removed her needles from Wei Ying’s chest. Lan Zhan suspected she needed a quiet moment to process whatever she and Wei Ying had discussed.

“I don’t need the medicine,” Wei Ying said mulishly as soon as they were out of earshot. “She’s fussing.”

“You had a melancholic episode last night,” Lan Zhan countered. “She was correct. I noticed it, but attributed it to the wine even though I knew that was abnormal for you.”

That shut Wei Ying down for a while. “Was it that noticeable?” he asked eventually.

Lan Zhan nodded. “To me,” he said. “To anyone who knows you.”

“So only you then,” Wei Ying chuckled, still sounding a bit low. His gaze slid towards Lan Zhan. “My core isn’t any different than it was when I really was sixteen, Lan Zhan. I didn’t carry any of my progress back with me, just some of the old damage from my demonic cultivation so, technically, I guess I’ve actually been set back. You’re better than me now.”

Unlikely.

“I noticed no difference in the boar hunt.” Lan Zhan was prepared to dig his heels in on the subject. He had not forgotten that Wei Ying was the one who’d pulled his hand out of Lan Zhan’s desperate grip in order to fall.

He believed Wen Qing when she said that despair was the enemy he’d have to guard Wei Ying from in this life and not his temper. The Yiling Laozu was an implacable enemy, but he was in fact very *very* slow to anger. *Sorrow*, though, had dogged his every step.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying sighed at him. “You’re being obstinate.”

“You said once that I was the person in this life who would truly know you,” Lan Zhan replied. He would not surrender that acknowledgement, then or now. “I still am.”

Wei Ying stopped walking and Lan Zhan turned to face him.

“You are the same for me,” he continued, watching the way his zhiji’s shoulders began to creep up. “No one else would say that to my face or mean it as you do. You are the only equal I will ever acknowledge.”

Wei Ying drew in a shuddering breath and walked into Lan Zhan’s space, but stopped just short of leaning into him. Lan Zhan’s arms itched to rise and pull him in to close the distance, but he was too afraid of ruining the fragile moment. Instead he bowed his head over Wei Ying’s lowered brow and tried to curve himself around the vulnerable man before him.

“Lan Zhan, *I’m tired*,” Wei Ying admitted. It was an admission, not a dismissal. “I don’t know if I can do it again.”

“You don’t have to.” Lan Zhan was prepared to pack him up, kidnap A-Yuan if Wen Qing hadn’t already cleared her people out of Dafan mountain, and turn his back on the entire cultivation world if they needed to. “We’ll leave.”

That stirred Wei Ying from his slump. “We won’t,” he said. “You can’t leave Cloud Recesses to burn any more than I can Lotus Pier. Don’t pretend you’d leave your brother or your uncle alone.”

This was the downside of being known so well, Lan Zhan acknowledged to himself. Wei Ying could see it even when Lan Zhan was lying to himself.

“After,” Lan Zhan heard himself saying. “We’ll take Wen Qing and her people and go. Leave the sects to fight among themselves. They aren’t worth you.”

“Aiyah, Lan Zhan, you’re the one they aren’t worth.” His voice and look were helplessly fond. “Why are you always trying to save me, ah?”

“Because I want to,” Lan Zhan replied simply. “Stay with me tonight. Come to the Jingshi before haishi.”

Wei Ying scowled, correctly intuiting that this was about Wen Qing’s diagnosis and not an offer for an assignation although Lan Zhan would have offered the latter in a heartbeat if he thought there was any chance Wei Ying would take him up on it. “I’ll take the medicine,” he huffed.

“You will because I will brew it for you.” Lan Zhan agreed. “After, I will play Serenity before you sleep.” Wen Qing hadn’t made any suggestions on what songs would work best, only that the Lan songs of spiritual healing would help.

“Is *that* what it takes to get into your bed, Lan-er-gege?” Wei Ying asked and then immediately turned beet red. The effect was so charming that Lan Zhan found it easy to reply instead of locking up the way he normally did in response to Wei Ying’s empty flirting.

“Yes,” Lan Zhan replied and wondered if he might actually manage that feat. Wei Ying, impossibly, turned even redder. He took note of that reaction for later use.

He still didn't have a guest bed, but didn't much care about losing a night of sleep or, if it came to it, putting a mat down on the floor. It would have to be after Wei Ying dropped off or else *he'd* try to sleep there and Lan Zhan experienced an immediate and visceral rejection to even thinking about it.

They were close enough to the guest houses by then that Jiang Wanyin found them and stole his sibling back. Lan Zhan allowed them to go, but visited the medical pavilion to fill Wen Qing's prescription before finding his next target.

Jiang Yanli was alone doing some supplemental reading in the late afternoon sun when Lan Zhan found her. She hurried to stand and bow when she spotted him.

"Lan-er-gongzi." She gave him a friendly, but confused smile. "A-Xian isn't around right now. I think he and A-Cheng went off to play, but I'm afraid I don't know where."

Lan Zhan returned her bow. "I came to speak with you, Jiang-guniang." He handed her the copies he'd made of both the medicine and acupuncture prescriptions. "From Wen-guniang for Wei-gongzi."

Her polite confusion evaporated and she took the scrips from his hand with more decisiveness than he'd seen from her except during the war. She read them both over. "I don't recognize the ingredients in this tea." She observed. "What is he sick with? Should he be resting?"

"It was described to me as a chronic condition characterized by low spirits," he explained. "I happened to be present when she examined him and promised to share these with you as he's most likely to listen to your directions."

"She knows us well after not very long." Jiang Yanli agreed.

"The tea is for when he experiences a dip in his spirits that seems to have no cause or one with cause that lasts too long. The acupuncture must be done monthly, but can be increased to every two weeks during stressful events." Lan Zhan searched for other words. "Wen-guniang expressed a concern to me that he might try to conceal his symptoms."

Wen Qing had said no such thing, but it was understood between them that if Wei Ying could hide an injury then he absolutely would.

"That..." Jiang Yanli wilted a little. "...sounds very in character for A-Xian. I'll do what I can. Thank you for bringing this to my attention even though I know A-Xian might not thank you for it." She considered him. "You are a very good friend. I didn't expect you and A-Xian would get along despite how much he wanted to. I'm happy to know that I misjudged you." She held up the papers. "I'll take good care of these."

Lan Zhan's ears heated up at the suggestion that Wei Ying wanted any part of him.

"Wen-guniang has also forbidden him to drink alcohol," he continued. "It will make his condition worse."

Jiang Yanli winced. "That will be more difficult. I don't know if I can put a stop to that."

She could temper it, which was all Lan Zhan cared to ask of her. He wanted to take full responsibility, but that was impractical and probably overstepping his boundaries at that. This whole conversation was overstepping of course, but not so far that Wei Ying couldn't forgive him.

Lan Zhan returned to his uncle's rooms for the evening meal, which was quiet as tradition demanded. Xichen, however, turned to him as soon as they cleared the trays. "One of the shidi mentioned to me that you were seen with Wei-gongzi this afternoon and that he seemed very upset. He said you also seemed to be concerned. Is everything alright?"

"He is experiencing a personal difficulty." Lan Zhan chose his words with even more care than usual. "He wishes he was not."

"Was that your purpose at the medical pavilion?" His uncle asked gruffly and then rolled his eyes when Lan Zhan turned to stare. "The prescription you filled contained certain ingredients that the doctors and pharmacists are required to notify me about when one of the disciples is taking them. There are dietary interactions the kitchens must be made aware of. Did your Wen doctor happen to mention any of that? I assume it was her since any of *our* doctors would have been able to give me a name for the patient."

His uncle's stress on the word 'our' indicated that the bulk of his irritation was that one of their guest disciples had sought medical help from another visiting disciple rather than the famous doctors of GusuLan.

"It was included in her instructions for his care," Lan Zhan replied. "I gave them to Jiang-guniang. She prepares meals for both her brothers. I have not been given permission to share any further details."

"If the boy's parents need to be contacted then I should be made aware." Lan Qiren tugged on his beard.

"Jiang-guniang will surely be willing to discuss the issue," Xichen interjected smoothly, but not without giving Lan Zhan a concerned look. "She is the most senior Jiang disciple present. This isn't an emergency, is it, Wangji?"

Lan Zhan shook his head.

"That's a relief," Xichen subsided. "It may be best to let Jiang-guniang make decisions regarding her younger brother's care in any event."

Lan Zhan's uncle made a face like he'd bitten into something rotten, but his attention was off in the middle distance.

"Yes" He admitted after a while, relenting with a tired sigh. "That would be for the best, but I will require a second opinion from our doctors before any further prescriptions are filled. Wen-guniang is talented, but she is..."

“...the personal physician of Wen-zongzhu,” Xichen reminded him gently.

“*All* the more reason,” Lan Qiren huffed, unrepentant. “The DafanWen are too reliant on physical intervention in medicine. Our Lan doctors don’t need to cut into anyone half as often.”

“I am willing to play for him as needed.” Lan Zhan was going to do it anyway, but it would be easier if his uncle thought it was his idea.

“Good, good.” Xichen smiled indulgently. “It’s good to care for your friend.”

Lan Zhan expected to be left alone after that, but Xichen followed him out of his uncle’s house and towards the Jingshi. The medicine sachets in his sleeve had an odd guilty weight as they walked and he worried that Wei Ying might try to come, see Xichen, and then leave.

He kept waiting for his brother to say goodnight and eventually had to stop walking before they got too far from the Hanshi --and subsequently too close to the Jingshi.

“Wangji.” Xichen toiled with Liebing; fidgeting in a way he rarely did. “*Is* Wei-gongzi your friend?”

Lan Zhan felt a chill, but did not reply.

“I told an untruth,” Xichen continued. “There was no shidi. *I* saw you and Wei-gongzi together.”

Lan Zhan’s hands clenched within the shelter of his sleeves. He didn’t like the direction of this conversation.

“I should ask what I really want to know.” Xichen searched Lan Zhan’s face for something. “*Is friendship* what you want from that young man?”

He felt horribly exposed; flayed open and laid bare before his brother. Lan Zhan’s expression must have answered for him because Xichen squeezed his shoulder.

“I understand,” he said softly. “Does he feel the same way?”

“I do not know.” Lan Zhan felt the answer was probably ‘no’, but sometimes Wei Ying said and did things that made him question what he knew; things that gave him a terrifying kind of hope.

“I think...” Xichen mulled over his words, “...that Wei-gongzi might be easier to read for people who are more removed from the situation. Would you like for me to speak to his sister?”

“For what?” Lan Zhan stepped back, confused.

“To find a solution.” Xichen smiled. “Wangji, if this is the person you want then I am prepared to help however I can.”



Not for the first time, Lan Zhan wondered if he really *was* in some sort of afterlife fantasy. Why else would his honorable and upright brother be standing in front of him offering to facilitate -if he was understanding correctly- some form of cutsleeve partnership.

“We are both men.” Lan Zhan’s voice sounded small even to him. It was hard to remember at the moment that he was technically now the older of the two of them, but Xichen looked the same at nineteen as he did at thirty eight.

“I’m aware,” Xichen agreed. “I’m given to understand that such relationships are usually kept less formal, but in all honesty there’s no law that I’m aware of against a more structured relationship, not one that we would care about in cultivator society. You might have to call each other sworn brothers in front of some commoners, but they don’t often care what we do either. So long as his family agrees and recognizes the relationship, what barrier is there?”

Too many to imagine, but Lan Zhan *wanted* it with a sudden fierce longing that silenced him and his brother knew him too well to take his silence as a denial.

Could it be that easy? Could he just --let their families make an arrangement? That is how it would have gone if either he or Wei Ying had been born female; he’d have expressed interest to his brother and his brother would have taken care of it from there.

No, his uncle wouldn’t agree.

Tolerating Wei Ying as a temporary student was a far cry from having him marry into the sect. Even so, the wanting choked out every denial that Lan Zhan tried to muster.

“I will meet with Jiang-guniang tomorrow,” Xichen promised, squeezing again.

Eventually he found his voice and asked the only question that could escape the blockade in his chest, “What if he says no?”

What if just asking ruined all the progress they’d made as friends?

“Then I will ask him why and attempt to remove any barriers he foresees to the match,” Xichen replied. “No one who’s seen the way he looks at you would ever believe it was because he didn’t want to.”

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Wei Ying did not appear that night, but then he’d never agreed to come. It was also possible that his sister had kept him under her eye until after curfew.

When Lan Zhan saw Wei Ying drag himself into the lecture hall looking like warmed-over garbage just ahead of Lan Qiren’s arrival with Jiang Wanyin following him like a seething nanny, a third possibility occurred to him. His feeling was confirmed when Jiang Yanli brought him over during the break.

“Wen-guniang said the first day will be difficult,” she told him apologetically. “I have an appointment over the break and A-Cheng promised to study with Nie-gongzi. Can I ask you to make sure he eats? He only wants to sleep.”

Lan Zhan nodded, trying not to react to what her appointment surely concerned.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Ying sank to his knees by Lan Zhan’s desk and sprawled over it. “This is so terrible. It feels worse than the original problem.”

“It will pass.” Lan Zhan glanced at Wen-guniang, who looked sympathetic but not very surprised. She nodded and departed, having no reason to approach them in public.

Wei Ying pointed at him, glaring over the hill of his own shoulder and shaking his finger. “You told on me to Shijie,” he accused. “Unfair.”

“I did,” Lan Zhan agreed. “She would have been upset to not know and you are upset when she is upset.”

“Stop making sense.” He sagged like a reluctant toddler as Lan Zhan went to help him up. “Lan Zhan, no. Don’t make me eat. I’ll be sick. I really will.”

“You won’t,” Lan Zhan told him, noting his uncle lingering outside the lecture hall and pretending not to watch them.

“Alright, alright.” Wei Ying got to his feet. “Where?”

The only place Lan Zhan cared to take him was the Jingshi and let him lounge on the floor while he fetched two ready-made trays from the big kitchen.

Wei Ying was sitting up on the porch when he returned, taking in the cool air and breathing in the scent of gentians as the breeze ruffled his bangs. Lan Zhan’s grip tightened on the edge of the bottom tray.

No.

This *wasn’t* something he could have. If Wei Ying’s family didn’t shut the discussion down then Lan Zhan’s own uncle would.

“Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying grinned and got up to meet him. He seemed a little more spry now that he wasn’t kneeling in the lecture hall. He probably should have been excused from class, but the Jiang sect never asked for allowances to be made from them aside from that time with the missing invitation. “Let me.”

“I will make tea.” Lan Zhan agreed, letting the trays go.

Food did help and Wei Ying was approaching something closer to his usual buoyant mood when Lan Zhan collected their dishes to set out for one of the juniors to pick up.

Xichen was approaching the Jingshi as he stepped out onto the porch and he smiled when their eyes met. A few steps behind him was Jiang Yanli who was trying to hold back her own radiant smile.

Lan Zhan’s heart leapt into his throat.

“Shijie?” Wei Ying had crawled over to look out the open door whe Lan Zhan froze.

“Are you feeling better, A-Xian?” She asked and when he nodded, added. “Would you mind walking with me for a bit? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

Lan Zhan couldn’t move so much as a centimeter until they were out of sight. Xichen came over to squeeze his shoulder again.

“She’s willing to help,” he said quietly. “She can’t make promises that her parents will agree, but she was willing to sound Wei-gongzi out for us.”

“Uncle will refuse.” Lan Zhan tucked one fist behind his back, reminding himself as much as informing Xichen.

“I will deal with Uncle.” Xichen told him. “If it becomes necessary, I will speak to father.”

Lan Zhan squinted at his brother. “He would not help either.” Their father was a distant figure in their lives. Lan Zhan never knew whether he loved the man or not, not with the certainty he’d had regarding his feelings for his mother. How could you love someone who you saw so little of?

“Whenever I consult him on Sect matters he always tells me to do as I please.” Xichen gave him an amused sideways glance. “I try not to abuse it.”

They lapsed into quiet then, watching the gate.

Wei Ying would say no.

Lan Zhan remembered his words in the Xuwanu’s cave. *‘Don’t worry, I don’t like men. I won’t do anything to you.’*

He’d been trying to be reassuring; unaware those words were anything but to a young Lan Zhan who’d only just come to terms with his desires and had, right up until that moment, thought he might stand a chance against rivals like Mianmian or Wen Qing.

A pale shape dropped into the garden from overhead. In the distance he could hear Jiang Yanli laughing and calling, “A-Xian!”

Wei Ying sheathed Suibian seemingly without looking. His gaze was locked on Lan Zhan and he looked... *he looked...*

“Are you serious?” Wei Ying walked straight past Xichen, who was leaving at speed, presumably to escort Jiang Yanli back. He didn’t shout it. There was no trace of mockery or incredulity in his voice. He sounded about as close to tears as Lan Zhan suddenly felt. “You cannot joke with me about this.”

“I am.” Lan Zhan could count all the words he’d ever said without meaning to on one hand and not even use all the fingers, but those two might have been the best of them. “I am serious.”

Wei Ying stopped when there wasn't much more than an inch of open space between them.

"Jiang-shushu and Yu-furen will never agree." Wei Ying's hands were clenched into fists at his side.

That wasn't *no* .

"Wei Ying." Lan Zhan couldn't say anything else, but he couldn't keep the longing out of his tone. *That hadn't been a no.*

"You know what's coming." Wei Ying's voice dropped to a hush. "You know what I might end up having to do."

"I will face it at your side." Lan Zhan reached out to cup Wei Ying's face. Wonder of wonders, he was permitted and Wei Ying turned his face into Lan Zhan's palm. "Where you go, I'll be there; in the indoctrination camp, in the cave, in the Burial Mounds, all of it."

Wei Ying gave a raspy chuckle and his hands came up to cup Lan Zhan's elbows. He didn't push Lan Zhan away, just supported him. "I'm going to try and avoid the Burial Mounds, just so you know."

"I would like it if you did," Lan Zhan agreed. Wen Qing seemed determined not to revisit them either, which he found hopeful.

Then, because he hadn't really asked and now that he knew the answer he needed to say it; "Be my husband."

"Aiyah, you say such nice things." Wei Ying closed his eyes. "Why now? What's so different about me that you like me now? I only annoyed you before."

"I liked you before." It still wasn't 'no'. He held onto that. "It frightened me and I took it out on you. Please forgive me."

Wei Ying's eyes opened just a sliver, just enough for Lan Zhan to see he was still conflicted. "If I'd come with you to Gusu, what would have happened? What did you want to happen?" He asked.

"I wanted to hide you," Lan Zhan admitted. "I wanted to play for you. I wanted you in my life. I believed it was the only capacity in which I'd be allowed to have you."

It probably wouldn't have played out that way, but at the time it was what Lan Zhan had thought could happen.

A soft breath of a chuckle brushed against his throat. "That's not what I thought you were asking," he said. "I thought it was like when we were children and you were commanding me to report for punishment."

Lan Zhan's sharp inhale was instant and stricken. Had he really?

"I know that's not what you said." Wei Ying straightened. "It's what I heard. You were right. There was harm. It just wasn't anything I'd thought to prepare for. I was ready for anger or insanity. I didn't recognize the other thing until it followed me here." He brushed a stray strand of hair out of Lan Zhan's eyes. "I don't know if I'm strong enough to say no to you. I want it too badly and I'm too selfish."

"Then don't be." Lan Zhan brushed his thumb along Wei Ying's cheekbone and marveled at being allowed. "Be generous and give *me* what *I* want."

Wei Ying let his face fall into the crook of Lan Zhan's shoulder in surrender. "Yu-furen is going to break both our hearts," he mumbled into the fabric.

That was a possibility if Lan Zhan's uncle didn't get there first, but more importantly that was a *yes*.

He wrapped his now freed arms around his zhiji and closed the gap between them.

"Then we'll go to Dongying," he said, breathing it into Wei Ying's hair as he hugged back. Lan Zhan noted the return of Xichen and Jiang Yanli. "They're back."

"Make them leave," Wei Ying huffed. "This hug is amazing."

"That would be discourteous." Lan Zhan did however leave his arms exactly where they were until Xichen and his future sister in law -one way or the other- reached the steps.

Jiang Yanli smiled at him the way he'd only really seen her welcome her own brothers, which reassured him that he was not the only one who'd made a decision on the matter.

"We should discuss this inside." Xichen suggested.

Lan Zhan felt immediately cold once Wei Ying reluctantly pried himself away, but they were permitted to sit next to one another at the tea table opposite Xichen and Jiang Yanli.

She turned herself slightly towards Xichen to open the discussion. "Lan-gongzi, do you have any thoughts on what this arrangement might look like?"

"Well, I thought... cultivation partners?" Xichen didn't much like being put on the spot, but he'd forced the entire situation so Lan Zhan had very little sympathy for him. "I think your parents might be willing to agree if they split their time between the two sects and that, of course, no competing marriages would be arranged for either Wangji or Wei-gongzi."

It was essentially a marriage that Xichen was describing without the ceremony.

Jiang Yanli nodded with such grace and Lan Zhan suspected Xichen's idea was about to be gently brushed off the table. "That is an admirable goal," she said, "I think it would be better to ask outright for a formal betrothal."

Xichen blinked at her, momentarily nonplussed.

"I have noticed..." Jiang Yanli folded her hands neatly in her lap. "...that negotiations often go more smoothly if one starts at a higher point than one is willing to settle for." She gave A-Xian a wry smile and he ducked his head, leaving little mystery about where she'd picked that trick up from.

In Lan Zhan's experience, most Sect Leaders either stated what they wanted outright and the other party said either 'yes', 'no', or they spent several hours squalling about the inappropriateness and presumption of the request in lieu of giving any actual answer.

"I would like to see A-Xian properly married for one," she continued. "I don't know if my parents would be willing to make that sort of agreement, but I'd like to allow for the possibility. That is what you two want, yes?"

"Shijie is so smart." Wei Ying squeezed Lan Zhan's hand under the table.

Lan Zhan nodded.

It wasn't that his brother's suggestion had no merit and Lan Zhan didn't care about pomp or ceremony, except he found that if it came to Wei Ying then he *did* a little bit. Wei Ying liked parties, for one. For another, he internalized anything that suggested he was shameful to a worrying degree.

Jiang Yanli knew that too. No wonder she was willing to press for formal marriage.

He'd have liked her better if she hadn't taken Wei Ying away with her at the end of the evening.

"I may not be able to speak to Uncle before he leaves for the conference," Xichen warned him sadly before he too departed for his own work. "We will sit down with him afterwards. It will only be a few days, Wangji," he promised.

Lan Zhan hadn't expected they would, but was unpleasantly reminded of the other things they had to worry about --such as Biling Lake.

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Wei Ying did not appear at the afternoon lectures. He was, Lan Zhan later discovered, sent to the medical pavilion for a second examination.

The senior healer adjusted his prescription slightly and ordered it to be taken daily and used in conjunction with regular sessions of Serenity, Clarity, or Harmony. Wen-guniang's tea was reserved as an emergency intervention. They also upped the number of times Wei Wuxian was meant to see the acupuncturist from once a month to every other week.

He found this out when Jiang Yanli found him to let him know that Wei Ying would be sleeping under doctor's supervision until he'd adjusted to his medication.

"They're worried," she confessed as he allowed her to walk her back to the guest houses. "One of the healers thought he'd been using resentful energy somehow until it came out that he spent several formative years in Yiling."

Lan Zhan frowned. Had he known that? The information felt familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd heard it.

"A-Xian probably won't want to tell you so it's up to me," she continued. "Otherwise you'll hear it from someone else and that would just be worse. A-Xian's parents died on a night hunt."

"Cangse Sanren and Wei Changzhe." Lan Zhan probably had not known that as a teenager, but it was unlikely he'd ever be questioned about it.

She nodded. "What people don't often know is that he didn't come to live with us at Lotus Pier right away," she told him, quietly so her voice would not travel. "My father went looking for him once he learned they were dead, but it took years. He lived as a street child during that time."

In other words he wouldn't have had even the slight protections most people in Yiling had of living inside a warded house. The QingheNie erected a barrier around the Burial Mounds long ago to contain the monsters and corpses inside, but it was old now and no one wanted the responsibility of refreshing it. Things escaped on a regular basis; small monsters and resentful energy.

"In Yiling?" Lan Zhan realized there'd been an extra layer of horror for his Wei Ying when it came to his flight to the burial grounds with the DafanWen; having to return literally to the gutter he'd come from.

He'd never been quite sure why *there* of all places except that it would have been hard place for the sects to chase them into. Sometimes he entertained the horrifying thought that Wei Ying really *had* spent his three missing months trapped there, despite the fact that Wei Ying had dismissed the notion to his face. This made more sense. If he'd spent time in Yiling then perhaps he'd known the Burial Mounds better than anyone had ever supposed.

"He carried some things away from it." Jiang Yanli pursed her lips. "An irrational fear of dogs, mostly, and a poor memory. Now *this* too."

*'All I remember is being chased by dogs,'* Wei Ying's voice said in his memory without any other context.

When had they talked about that?

He had no opportunity to ask further questions. Jiang Wanyin found them and snatched his sister away.

The look he shot Lan Zhan over his shoulder as they went promised later retribution, which Lan Zhan didn't care about. He was prepared to accept Jiang Yanli as his sister. He'd call *Wen Chao* brother before he ever acknowledged Jiang Wanyin and it looked like the feeling was, as ever, mutual.

The doctors knocked Wei Ying out with needles before he arrived to check in on his zhiji, but he was allowed to play Harmony and Mend before being politely, respectfully booted out the

door.

His uncle was not present at the evening meal. It wasn't abnormal ahead of a conference. He usually took those nights to meditate and clear his mind before being forced to deal with representatives from the other sects. Lan Qiren minded their children far less than he minded them and after having had to deal with Yao-zongzhu on Xichen's behalf, Lan Zhan understood why.

Wei Ying was released from the medical pavilion and into Lan Zhan and Xichen's mutual custody shortly before Su She approached them regarding the problem of the Shui Gui in Biling Lake.

Lan Zhan was heavily tempted to take him up on his offer to attend to the issue personally, but Su-zongzhu had only been reasonably competent if pretentious as an adult. As a young man he let his inferiority complex steer his actions far too often. Unfortunately, it was Xichen's decision.

"Wangji, come with me please." Xichen turned to Wei Ying. "Wei-gongzi, if you are feeling up to it then you are welcome to come as well."

"The doctor told me the adjustment period is all over. If I have any more trouble then it'll be something new. I'm ready for a hunt. There's a lot of water in Yunmeng." Wei Ying grinned. "We're familiar with Shui Gui. I'll bring Jiang Cheng. He's fought them too."

"Very good. We'll meet at the front gate." Xichen smiled at Lan Zhan as Wei Ying bounded off, making it very clear just whose sake he'd invited Wei Ying out for.

Lan Zhan would never regret starting the process of making Wei Ying his husband, but it would limit the time they were allowed to spend together unsupervised. Xichen was clearly arranging time for them to be together while technically chaperoned.

He nodded his gratitude. He wanted Wei Ying there for many reasons, not the least of which was that he'd been reminded during the boar hunt that Wei Ying was an excellent night hunter and a genuine pleasure to work with.

Wen Qing did not appear nor did her brother, who Lan Zhan had yet to see any evidence of in Cloud Recesses proper.

Jiang Wanyin was excited enough to be invited that he hardly remembered to shoot his glares at Lan Zhan until they'd been on the water for a while and he got bored enough to remember he was angry about something.

It was easy to ignore him. He wasn't acting out where Xichen could see and Lan Zhan was distracted by the flute tucked into the back of his zhiji's belt. It had acquired a decorative violet silk tassel that swayed in the wind and sometimes brushed against Wei Ying's hip.

The hunt went much as before at first with a few minor aberrations. Wei Ying's boat was the one the first Shui Gui latched onto and Lan Zhan was the one to flip it out from under him.



He had not planned for Jiang Wanyin to get drenched, but that was a pleasant little fringe victory.

Despite Lan Zhan's and Wei Ying's best efforts, Su She sent his blade into the water and did not get it back.

Jiang Wanyin was close enough to retrieve Su She from the water Abyss when it began to swallow the boats. No one ended up in the water and Lan Zhan tentatively thought they might be able to get through the hunt without difficulty.

Then the center of the whirlpool dipped and surged.

A stout tendril of water shot out of the lake surface like a waterspout in reverse. It ignored Jiang Wanyin and his struggling burden and stabbed straight for Wei Ying, who'd flown up high on Suibian.

Xichen dodged and the other disciples to evade the sudden attack as well. They scattered to regroup higher and not present such a concentrated target. Wei Ying, though, held his ground and the Abyss *yearned* towards him.

For a second it wasn't Wei Ying looking down on the undulating water. He wasn't excited or frightened or angry; just calm or perhaps vaguely inconvenienced at best. It was an expression Lan Zhan recognized from a different time and a different Wei Ying.

The Yiling Laozu reached into his belt with a sigh and lifted Xiaodan to his lips. The song he played was light and rhythmic, almost like a children's chanting song.

The Abyss froze as Wei Ying played, but then began to follow him slowly as he flew backwards. It moved in time to the tune. Its body, a long undulating serpent of water, rose out of the lake surface as Wei Ying lured it higher, higher, and higher.

Lan Zhan followed, paying the others no mind. Jiang Wanyin was yelling about something and even Xichen was asking concerned questions that no one could answer. Lan Zhan ignored them all. He knew what his Zhiji looked like when he was in control of the situation. He was doing something and it would probably work, but he wanted to be there if it didn't -- or if it did and Wei Ying had forgotten to hold back the strength he needed to get down safely.

The Abyss's body stretched and rippled until it left the lake altogether as it struggled into the sky after Wei Ying. That was when the tone of Wei Ying's song shifted from a lure to a song Lan Zhan couldn't quite quantify. If he had to describe it, it felt like heat sounded; the soft drone of cicadas, cracking soil, and the absence of wind.

His quarry felt it too, but it couldn't seem to retreat. It thrashed out its death throes as Wei Ying played it a merciless song of summer turning into drought.

The Abyss's serpentine body began to shrink. It was *evaporating*.

All told, it took an hour of constant playing as the Abyss withered away into nothing. Wei Ying was flagging himself towards the end and Lan Zhan positioned himself behind his zhiji

so that all Wei Ying had to do once it was over was fall backwards. He did, landing backwards against Lan Zhan's shoulder with a tired huff.

"Remind me who's better?" Lan Zhan asked dryly once Wei Ying had his feet on Bichen and called Suibian back in its sheath.

"I gotta keep up, Lan Zhan. You set a hard standard," Wei Ying defended himself with a half smile. "The Shui Gui are still in the lake. I can hear them whispering all the way up here. They need to be cut back before they disperse down the river."

"Mn." Lan Zhan was prepared to leave that to his sect brothers and sisters. "Where did you learn that song?"

No such thing existed even in the most secret annals of the sect library. If it did then Lan Zhan would have known about it.

"I didn't." Wei Ying rolled his shoulders, chasing out the ache of playing for so long. "I just remember the harmonies. It was close enough to deal with that thing. I don't think it was very old."

Lan Zhan frowned. "What harmonies?"

Wei Ying blinked back at him. "The sounds --or the tides, I guess. I felt it like sound. Wen Qing said she felt it like motion. Was it different for you?"

"Was what different?" he asked.

Wei Ying cocked his head, looking worried. "Lan Zhan, what's the last thing you remember before you came to the library?"

"I closed my eyes." Lan Zhan could tell that was the wrong answer. "Then I opened them in the library and you were there."

Wei Ying's jaw dropped before he snapped his mouth shut. "That's... going to be important, probably," he said to himself and patted Lan Zhan's arm. "Don't worry about it for now."

Lan Zhan had to let it rest because Xichen caught up to them.

"Wei-gongzi, what was that?" He asked, uncharacteristically grim.

"Ah, just an experiment. Looks like it works off paper as well as on." Wei Ying tried to laugh it off. "I didn't expect there to be a Waterborne Abyss here," he looked around like this was the first time he'd ever seen the lake. "How did it spawn here? Are there a lot of trading vessels that come through here? Shipwrecks?"

"No. The surrounding rivers and lakes are all calm waters and there's no natural hazards here." Xichen looked back down at the now placid waters. "It must have had some sort of mutualistic relationship with the Shui Gui. It can't have been born here so it must have come in through one of the rivers feeding the lake; a dangerous ferry crossing, maybe. The river runs faster and the terrain is rockier to the north."

“The Shui Gui are probably still in the water,” Lan Zhan interjected.

Xichen sighed, acknowledging the task ahead. “Take Wei-gongzi and Jiang-gongzi back to Caiyi and see if you can hire more boats. Requisition more nets from the sect storehouse on the docks. Wei-gongzi, I greatly appreciate your assistance. However, please sit the rest of the hunt out on shore. I’ve never heard that score before and I’d like to discuss it with you further before I can allow you to use any more spiritual energy today.” He tempered the light scolding with a smile. “Allow this elder brother to worry. No more experiments.”

Wei Ying held up three very sincere fingers in a promise.

Jiang Wanyin met them and the river mouth that would take them back to Caiyi. “Wei Wuxian!” He drew up alongside his brother. “What was that?”

“A new trick.” Wei Ying wagged his eyebrows. “Not how I planned to try it out the first time, I have to admit.”

“You’d better *not* have.” He jerked his chin at the flute. “Where’d that come from?”

“A gift from a friend. Careful, it bites.” Wei Ying warned him.

“Don’t worry, I can feel it telling me to back off from here.” Jiang Wanyin leaned back with a grimace. Unsurprisingly, he and Wei Ying were very different people. If Xiaodan wanted Wei Ying then it would emphatically *not* want someone like his brother. Lan Zhan empathized. “Who unloaded *that* thing on you and what did you *do* to them?”

“Not sure.” Wei Ying left his answer deliberately vague. “I’m benched from the rest of the hunt. You’re going to have to represent Jiang without your poor shixiong.”

That netted him a quick, savage smile. “We should leave *something* for Lan sect to do,” he said with magnanimity and darted ahead.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Wei Ying said over his shoulder when Lan Zhan watched him go, feeling deeply unimpressed. This attitude had already been tiresome when they really were sixteen. “He’ll be your little brother too soon if Shijie and Zewu-jun come through for us.”

“Mn.”

Lan Zhan held him tighter. It was a small price to pay if so.

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If Xichen had any hope that a conversation with Wei Ying about the score that Lan Zhan had tentatively titled ‘High Summer’ would reassure him then that hope was misplaced. He came out of their long closed-door conversation after they’d all returned to Cloud Recesses with an expression that said he’d left the room with more questions than he’d started with.

Wei Ying finally explained the next time they were allowed to be alone, which was not until the next day and only while Lan Zhan was playing Serenity for him per the doctors’

instructions. Xichen was technically in the room, but on the other side of a partition while pretending to read.

“The traditional way of getting rid of a Waterborne Abyss is draining the lake it's in, taking away the horde of bodies and sunken treasure that spawned it, and then exposing the lakebed to strong light for three years.” Wei Ying explained, laying on his side next to Lan Zhan as he played. “So it's weak to heat and light. If it wasn't local to the area or if it spawned abnormally then there probably wasn't much on the lakebed to anchor it. If it could move to strike at something in the air then there was a chance I could pull it all the way out of the lake. Then, once I had it, I played a song I thought would dry it out.”

No wonder Xichen had looked so pinched when he'd left yesterday. People often looked like that when Wei Ying opened his mouth and reminded them that he was frighteningly intelligent under all his noise and protective coloration.

“Where did you learn that song?” It was as close as Lan Zhan could get to asking about the ‘harmonies’ Wei Ying had mentioned. If he and Wen Qing had both experienced the phenomenon and expected him to know about it too then the options were very limited. They'd both died long before he had.

“It's not really a song.” Wei Ying flopped over onto his back with a groan as Serenity moved to a more intense passage. He was definitely feeling it, which meant there was something for it to work on. “It's like evoking a feeling or a concept and then improvising variations on it. You're doing it now. It's just someone figured out how to write reliable sheet music for it, I think.”

Serenity was a *very* old song; most of the later songs of the Lan tradition had been based on it to greater or lesser effect through generations of experimentation. Along with Cleansing, it was one of the first songs their Founder had passed down to his disciples so what Wei Ying suggested was possible.

Lan An *was* said to have died once, briefly, before being resuscitated by Lan Dai, his wife and cultivation partner. The experience was rumored to have changed him profoundly.

Peace and healing were the fundamentals of the Lan way. Maybe that was what he'd taken away with him from death.

“Wangji,” Xichen called from beyond the partition, sounding a little sorry. “I'm reminding you of the time.”

He'd foolishly volunteered to help renew the wards on the storehouses and library. It had been for a purpose. Lan Zhan remembered the improvements they'd made to the old wards, which only provided protection from spiritual infiltration. The new ones smothered fire and regulated humidity. It might not save Cloud Recesses from Wen Xu, should he come, but the first time he'd watched his home burn like flashpaper.

Improved wards could buy them precious hours during an attack and also combat that other mortal enemy of archivists; rot. The updated wards hadn't been a difficult sell and no one

bothered to ask Lan Zhan where he'd gotten the design once they'd agreed that it would function.

He worked the rest of the day fuelled by determination and the two minutes after Xichen called a halt to his playing where he'd been allowed to stand with Wei Ying alone.

Lan Zhan was making quiet plans as he made his lonely way back to the Jingshi. He didn't know how much longer his venerated ancestress could hold out. He did not want to chance the possibility that anyone else would be pulled into the Cold Water Cave as he'd been. Wei Ying knew the Yin Iron better than anyone living or dead, but as Wei Ying had said, he had no interest in landing himself under the bastinado twice.

He stilled as he noticed a dark shape leaning against the gate of the Jingshi.

How Jiang Wanyin had learned where Lan Zhan lived within Cloud Recesses was a question for another day. He knew the other man too well to mistake his current expression for anything other than an imminent confrontation.

"Curfew is approaching." Lan Zhan fell back onto the disciplinarian script. "Return to the guest house."

"There's time enough for what I have to say, *Lan-er-gongzi*." Trust Jiang Wanyin to make an otherwise courteous form of address sound like an insult. He pushed himself away from the gate and came to stand in front of Lan Zhan. "*You* need to stay away from my brother."

Lan Zhan had not concerned himself with what Wei Ying or Jiang-guniang were telling their brother. The answer was, it seemed, 'nothing.'

Hardly surprising.

"Return to the guest house or be escorted back," Lan Zhan replied coolly. Neither of the other Jiangs whose opinions he cared about would appreciate it if he took the bait their brother was offering.

"Nothing else to say?" Jiang Wanyin came to stand very close, eye to eye with Lan Zhan. He *tsked* when his only answer was stony silence. "I don't know what game you decided to play with Wei Wuxian, but it's over. If I have to tell you again then it'll become a matter between our clans. Understood?"

Lan Zhan was too used to the active menace of Jiang Wanyin's older incarnation and sailed past the younger one without acknowledging his blustering.

Entering the Jingshi's yard was a bridge too far even for Jiang Wanyin in full temper. Lan Zhan waited inside, watching out a window for a moment to make sure that Jiang Wanyin both left and left in the direction of the guest houses.

He wondered what that outburst had been about.

Jiang Yanli would need to be informed. She knew her brother best.

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Jiang Yanli received the news by folding her hands in her lap and looking briefly, incredibly tired. Lan Zhan almost regretted telling her about her brother's visit.

Jin Zixuan had mostly fallen off Wei Wuxian's list of priorities and subsequently Lan Zhan's. There would be no fight at Qixi. They both knew he'd eventually see Jiang-guniang's many stellar qualities and would be less obnoxious about it in the interim if he wasn't challenged on the subject.

It helped that her beauty was the sort that grew and refined with age into something more compelling than mere loveliness. She was a perfectly attractive teenager, but even Lan Zhan - who was not inclined in such directions- was not at all surprised when the match Jin Zixuan had considered beneath him for so long suddenly became a matter of greater interest to him after she'd grown into her adult self.

Even so, his current attitude towards their betrothal was difficult for her to bear and unlike them she had no way of knowing it was a temporary trial that was hardly worth her attention. Jin Zixuan was not rude to her exactly, but he showed her and her family very little consideration.

Lan Zhan had come to realize that she *needed* the reassurance of affection and visible displays of preference from the people in her life. It was the reason she responded so well to Wei Ying's particular brand of attention seeking. They both got something they needed from it.

She should not have had to bear Jin Zixuan's neglect in addition to everything else she had to manage for her family and her own studies.

"He knows something is wrong," she sighed. "A-Xian doesn't want to talk about it. I don't necessarily blame him, but A-Cheng knows when he's deflecting."

She looked around, ascertaining that they did not have an audience or an eavesdropper.

"A-Cheng feels things very deeply, but he also lashes out when he's hurt and when he does he always draws blood. A-Xian would never admit that he's hiding his illness from A-Cheng because he doesn't want it thrown in his face the next time they quarrel, but..." she didn't finish the sentence, letting the statement hang.

Lan Zhan nodded his understanding and did not comment that most people grew out of such things as children. It was not his place to say so.

"Zewu-jun and I have also decided to keep the matter of those *other* negotiations quiet until he's spoken to your uncle and we know whether or not he supports the match. We'll tell him after Zewu-jun is able to approach our parents." She cupped one of her cheeks in her palm. "I honestly don't know which A-Cheng would take worse; them saying yes or telling Zewu-jun no." She chuckled at the expression of Lan Zhan's face, which he hadn't realized he was making. "A-Cheng is a complicated person with many feelings."

"Forgive me for adding to your burdens, Jiang-guniang." Lan Zhan bowed with sincerity.

“We older siblings prefer to know what you younger ones are up to.” She reassured him with a conspiratorial smile. “It’s the *not* knowing that worries us. The most frightening sound in Lotus Pier when A-Cheng and A-Xian were little was a sudden silence.”

He could believe it. “Please excuse me.”

“Take care.” Jiang Yanli waved gently as he left. She sounded like she meant it.

He caught a glimpse of gold and white as he exited the common courtyard shared by all the guest houses. To his surprise, he recognized the Jin disciple who’d stepped off the path and was turning this way and that with all her focus turned inwards.

Mianmian.

It wasn’t her real name, but no one had ever introduced them and Lan Zhan did not recall anyone ever using her proper name within his hearing. Wei Ying had called her Mianmian exclusively, mostly because it seemed to irritate her and he could get away with it because he was good at making it clear when he was being charming yet harmless.

No one expected courtesy or chivalry from Lan Zhan, but he could not shake the feeling that Wei Ying would be somehow disappointed in him if he didn’t try to make sure she was alright.

“Jin-guniang,” he sounded flat and forbidding.

She startled upright and, after a blank moment that made it clear she was not ‘Jin’-guniang and he’d guessed wrong, saluted and said, “I am Luo Qingyang, Lan-er-gongzi, an outer disciple of LanlingJin.”

“You are distressed.” Again, he could not make his tone anything that even approached warm or inviting. Part of him was still sixteen and would forever be seethingly jealous forever of her easy dynamic with Wei Ying; of her useful little herb pouches and the effortless way she understood his esoteric poetry references.

“Forgive this disciple.” She bowed. “It is a personal matter.” She stayed that way for a moment, clearly stuck on a question. Her courage came back to her after a short while and she straightened. “Lan-er-gongzi, this disciple did not intend to eavesdrop on your conversation with Jiang-guniang. I was coming to visit with her and happened upon you both.” Her face turned entirely pink. “Does Lan-er-gongzi have *intentions* towards Jiang-guniang that my young master should be made aware of?”

It was a beyond presumptuous question and Lan Zhan immediately wished he’d left her fretting in the grass.

“No,” he replied frostily. His answer didn’t seem to reassure her, but Lan Zhan had lost his patience with the entirety of the Jin sect. “Good afternoon, Luo-guniang,” he said and removed himself from her presence.

He did not relax until Wei Ying found him later making pointed use of a soothing overlook where his uncle frequently took tea. The view and susurrus of pine needles were not helping his mood as he'd hoped.

"There you are, Lan Zhan." Wei Ying dropped onto one of the carved stools at the high table Lan Zhan sat at while not playing his guqin. He'd brought it out to soothe himself with music, but had yet to play.

Wei Ying twigged straight away to Lan Zhan's sour mood in a way that made him feel exposed. It was deeply unpleasant, but also addictive. "What's the matter? Has someone been cruel to my Lan-er-gege?"

He said it half jokingly, but there was a curl of real and dark interest in the statement that soothed the unhappy thing Lan Zhan had been wrestling with.

"I was overheard by a Jin disciple while speaking to your sister." Lan Zhan did not clarify which disciple because he knew Wei Ying would forgive her right away and he selfishly did not want her to be forgiven. "They implied I was having an affair with her."

A bright smile burst across Wei Ying's face. "You and Shijie are talking?" he asked with poorly concealed joy. "That's great! I thought you two would get along if you ever got a chance."

Lan Zhan nodded to acknowledge his deep respect and growing affection for Jiang Yanli.

"Ignore the Jin." Wei Ying waved off the 'affair'. "They're used to assuming the worst living the way they do. They don't know how to be regular people. Just look at Jin Zixuan."

It was an accurate statement and Lan Zhan endeavored, with great difficulty and recalcitrance, to take it to heart.

"More importantly, we owe Meng Yao something good," Wei Ying continued, crossing his legs on the stool and testing his balance by rocking around in circles.

The tea was doing something. Lan Zhan could tell. It was a subtle change, but Wei Ying's body language reminded him more and more of Wei Ying prior to his time in the Burial Mounds. He fidgeted, he gestured, and he talked more with his hands.

Back then, after he'd reappeared following his three month disappearance, his whole posture was tighter; as if in an effort to keep something in him contained. He held his hands behind his back when he talked. He stopped bouncing. Instead he *prowled*. It had been disconcertingly attractive in ways that Lan Zhan had struggled against because he'd known that something he couldn't put a name to was *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

Now he knew.

"Why is that?" Lan Zhan's hands found the strings of his guqin more easily and he began to experiment with replicating the sound of the pine trees.



“He was so very impressed with seeing us fly back from Biling lake.” Wei Ying shared with a smile that made him look uncannily like his sister for a moment. “Jiang Cheng is giving him flying lessons.”

Whether he knew it or no, Xichen wouldn’t be happy about that. Flying lessons were an intimate hands-on affair. Maybe Jiang Wanyin would do such a bad job that Xichen could justify stepping in for a corrective tutorial.

It was unlikely. Jiang Wanyin was, for all his personality defects, an excellent flyer.

Wei Ying smiled, clearly waiting for him to get the point. He lost patience after about a minute and clarified; “So Jiang Cheng will be busy in the afternoons for a while.”

Ah.

“Excellent.” It *was* good news.

“I can hear it a bit now.” Wei Ying’s good humor faded and he turned to look in the direction of back hills and the cold spring. “She’s fading. It’s getting louder.”

“The Yin Iron.” Lan Zhan’s hands stilled on the guqin. “Like the harmonies you mentioned?”

“Like that.” Wei Ying agreed. “I think it’s something similar -just present in life instead of --- well, you know. That’s why I can hear it now.” He looked sideways at Lan Zhan. “You really don’t remember it?”

‘It’ being death, presumably.

“No.” Lan Zhan looked at him. “You do?”

Wei Ying nodded. “I suppose we know when our benefactor cast his spell now. If you don’t remember then it was right after you died.”

“Mn.” Lan Zhan disliked the idea that it could have been *immediately* after. That suggested planning. It suggested that his death had been arranged or, at the very least, taken advantage of. He could not see how anyone could have, though. There’d been too many factors and accidents and bad luck that contributed to his bad end. “What was it like?”

“Death?” Wei Ying shrugged one shoulder. “Like being in an ocean with no surface and no shore, but you’re part of it. Nothing’s contained or separated, but somehow it’s all still distinct. It all felt like music to me; like I *was* music. Ah.” He rubbed the back of his head and looked sheepish. “It changed everything I thought I knew about cultivation. I wish I had words that fit so I could describe it. Even back then, I couldn’t wait to share it with you.”

Lan Zhan felt that way every day of his life. He stood and cupped the back of Wei Ying’s head.

“Don’t hurry to show me,” he murmured and pressed a very chaste kiss to his zhiji’s forehead. Wei Ying turned violently red and squawked so hard he overbalanced off his stool. He would have fallen except Lan Zhan was there to steady him. “I’m ready to wait.”

“I promised my sister I wouldn’t kiss you until after we’re betrothed or we have to elope.” Wei Ying complained, gripping his lapels. “Don’t set me up to fail.”

“Never.” Lan Zhan promised and so resisted the urge he felt then to press kisses into the white knuckles below his face. “Elope?”

“It’s her back up plan.” Wei Ying let him back away and resume his seat. “We’ll become dashing rogue cultivators until Jiang Cheng takes over as sect leader and graciously invites us back to YunmengJiang.”

“Xichen would become sect leader first.” Lan Zhan had no issue with the first part of that hypothetical situation, but felt obliged to point out the flaw in her reasoning. “We would have been welcomed back to GusuLan long before that point.”

“Maybe.” Wei Ying’s expression said he wasn’t about to wait on an invitation from Lan Qiren and Lan Zhan had no good counter argument to offer him.

## Chapter End Notes

It's the get together chapter!

If anyone's wondering, the reason why LWJ hasn't gone looking for WQ is because I've noticed in historical Chinese novels that an unmarried man getting an unmarried woman alone is actually SUPER disrespectful and even dangerous to her personally/socially. He'd need a very good reason or someone willing to go with him, plus the Lan and Wen sects don't seem super friendly so there's absolutely no slack in the social boundaries between them. WQ is actually taking her reputation into her own hands by seeing LWJ alone, but that's a decision she can make for herself as a cultivator and a doctor. LWJ isn't going to make it for her.

Him seeing JYL alone is a somewhat dicey decision too. It's soooort of OK because they're in a public space and he's speaking to her in her role as the oldest representative of Jiang Sect regarding a matter that concerns her Shidi (WWX). Plus, Lan sect and Jiang sect are way friendlier than Lan sect and Wen sect, so they can mix a little easier.

As you can see, though, it still causes trouble. Mianmian was not entirely outside her rights to ask LWJ to explain himself, but it was still kind of disrespectful to phrase it the way she did with the assumption that they had bad intentions. Mianmian is usually smarter than that, but I feel like she was kind of panicking because the situation between JYL and JZX is already very tense.

Normally this would have gotten resolved by JZX talking to his fiancée and clarifying the matter to his subordinates so they don't start acting out, but we all know he's not going to do that.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Xichen was waiting at their uncle's door looking pensive when Lan Zhan, temporarily satiated by an afternoon spent with Wei Ying and having hashed out a plan for when they'd make an attempt on Cold Water Cave, reported for the evening meal.

"Wangji," he turned Liebing in his palm. "We spoke."

"He refused." Lan Zhan interpreted. He'd expected as much so why did the air suddenly feel so thin? Why did he feel like he couldn't draw a full breath?

"Uncle has not yet made a decision," Xichen told him, trying to feign optimism. "He wants to speak to you first. He's in his study."

Lan Zhan nodded once with more confidence than he felt. This was not a familiar pattern. He didn't know what this meant.

Lan Qiren was seated at his desk, staring into a cup of tea when Lan Zhan found him. He glanced over and made a gruff noise. "Wangji." He nodded to the seat opposite him. "Sit."

Lan Zhan did. They stared at each other in silence. His uncle, as people often did when confronted with him, cracked first.

His uncle set his teacup down hard and bit out a question, "Why?" he asked.

"I want him." Lan Zhan had so many answers to that question and all of them were variations on the one he gave.

Lan Qiren closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose as if to ward off a headache. "Xichen tells me he returns your feelings, but marriage isn't only a matter of *wanting*."

"At its heart, it should be," Lan Zhan replied.

"There is your family to consider." Lan Qiren did not quite slap the table, but only because it was forbidden. He came very close when he brought his hand down next to his cup. "There is your clan. There is your spouse. There are your future children."

"I have considered them." Lan Zhan felt, not for the first time, that he really had been carved from white jade. He was still, heavy, and unmoveable. "Wei Ying is already a cultivator of great renown and will be a credit to whatever clan can claim him. He would be an excellent spouse, cultivation partner, and parent should we be given the opportunity."

"What can he bring to Cloud Recesses that we can't find elsewhere?" Lan Qiren pressed.

“A new branch of musical cultivation.” Lan Zhan stared straight ahead, prepared to weather this storm. “Xiongzhong will have told you of the Waterborne Abyss.”

“Hm.” Lan Qiren didn’t comment. “What use would he be to you as a spouse? He cannot give you children. Our line will end with you if Xichen never marries.”

What reason could he give? It could not be anyone else for him but Wei Ying. “He sees me.” Lan Zhan spoke slowly. “My achievements. My failings. Me. Having been so known, there can be no one else for me.”

Lan Qiren covered his eyes and drew a long breath. “Child.” He had not called Lan Zhan that in over ten years. “What will *you* give him?”

Lan Zhan finally looked at his uncle, who seemed to have aged a year for every minute they’d been speaking.

“Cloud Recesses is no place for such a person,” he continued. “You and I thrive here. We crave quiet, safety, and structure. This place is not for everyone. It’s fine for the sect sons and daughters to spend a year here and take back whatever of our discipline they care to integrate into their own behavior. It’s a brief annoyance. Forcing one to *live* here is different. You saw what it did to your mother. *His* mother nearly burned it down because the Elders would not let her leave when she wanted to and she was only here for the guest lectures.”

It took every moment of his accumulated years to bite back his first few furious responses. Shouting here would only undermine him and he could tell that was what his uncle was trying to provoke him into doing.

“I will stand by him,” Lan Zhan told his uncle. “Wherever he goes or whatever he does.”

*‘I will not lock him in a house.’* Lan Zhan did not say. If he hadn’t done it when Wei Ying was slowly killing himself in the Burial Mounds then he never would. He could have. He’d thought about it. He hadn’t.

Lan Qiren *did* cover his face then and Lan Zhan braced himself.

They would elope. It would be easier in a way. With no sect connections, they could go where they needed to, do whatever they needed to. Lan Zhan was no stranger to travel. He’d spent nearly fifteen years looking for chaos. He knew how to find it. Wei Ying would thrive in such a life. They could both be happy like that. Lan Zhan didn’t need structure the way his uncle thought he did. He just tolerated it well. There was a difference.

“Mark your words, Wangji.” His uncle sighed. “Mark them well. Tell Xichen he may submit a draft of the proposal letter to me in the morning and that I will take my meal alone tonight.”

Lan Zhan stared at his uncle until Lan Qiren waved him irritably off.

He stood and saluted. “Thank you, Shufu.”

His uncle called out to him as he left, “*Wangji.*”

Lan Zhan paused and turned.

Lan Qiren sighed again. "Your parent's relationship was not how it had to be. Their circumstances were extraordinary," he said quietly, looking into the middle distance. "The other sects rarely marry into GusuLan so they don't know that allowances are to be made for those who marry in. Your great-great grandmother was from QingheNie. She kept a house in Caiyi and spent the warm months there. It doesn't have to be a prison sentence. We'll..." he sighed, "...we'll figure something out about children."

He could not answer past his heart, which was lodged in his throat and only saluted again.

Xichen was waiting outside and his eyes flew wide when Lan Zhan managed a slow, disbelieving nod.

His uncle had *agreed*.

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Lan Zhan's morning was spent in a state that somehow transcended anxiety and bordered on disassociation as he watched his brother submit four separate drafts of the proposal letter before Lan Qiren would agree to allow one to be shown to Jiang Yanli for review.

It wasn't the normal way of things, but they were in uncharted waters.

Lan Zhan's uncle seemed confident in his ability to argue Jiang Fengmian around, but harumphed, stroked his beard, and refused to comment when Xichen asked him about Yu Ziyuan.

Jiang Yanli had better diplomatic instincts when her mother was involved. They'd need her help.

There was no time to do so before the morning lecture and Lan Zhan briefly regretted having received his uncle's full support when the man called out to her without even the pretence of subtlety as they dispersed for the afternoon break, "Jiang-guniang. Please stay behind."

Neither he, Wei Ying, nor Jiang Wanyin were allowed to hang back. Oddly, a flock of Jin retainers surrounding Jin Zixuan were also loitering around the lecture hall until they were shooed off by Xichen.

Jiang Wanyin took his brother away. Wei Ying cast a longing look after Lan Zhan that warmed him all the way through, but allowed himself to be taken. They hadn't had time to speak. He didn't know what it meant that Lan Zhan's uncle and Wei Ying's sister were in a private conference, but he had to suspect.

Lan Zhan's stomach did not want food so he took himself off to the cold spring. He did not go into the water. He just went to think.

He noted the flock of Jin retainers trailing after him, but assumed they would veer off to their own afternoon plan until they formed a semi circle around him and fenced him in against the

water's edge. Jin Zixuan was not in evidence nor was Luo Qingyang. To his annoyance, Jin Zixun *was*.

Lan Zhan looked the assembled cultivators over with a slow unimpressed glance.

Jin Zixun crossed his arms over his chest with an extraordinarily fake smile. "Lan-er-gongzi. My friends and I are having a disagreement. I hoped you might settle it for us."

There was no point in replying to Jin Zixun, in Lan Zhan's opinion. He'd forgotten, in the years since the man's death, just how much he liked the sound of his own voice and throwing his weight around. Letting him talk would force him to get to the point faster.

"You see, Heng-xiong here..." Jin Zixun gestured to one of the people standing on either side of him. "...he says that GusuLan is showing unprecedented interest in the young mistresses attending the lecture this year."

Ah. Luo-guniang told her master what she saw and that information had made its way to Jin Zixun's ears.

"Now *I* told him..." Jin Zixun continued, "...that the gentlemen of Lan sect are far too dignified to go sniffing around women who are already taken."

No, that was the purview of Jin-zongzhu as Lan Zhan understood it. He did not reply beyond a slow bored blink.

"You see the issue?" Jin Zixun reached out to clap Lan Zhan on the shoulder, but his courage failed him at the last second. He turned the gesture into brushing an invisible something off Lan Zhan's shoulder. His fingers did not quite manage to touch Lan Zhan's pristine white robes. "Perhaps Lan-er-gongzi can clarify things for us? You and Zewu-jun have been seen meeting so often with Jiang-guniang. People could get the wrong idea."

"No." Lan Zhan acknowledged the anger simmering in him. He had not expected to understand Wei Ying quite so well in this arena. In retrospect, that fight following the lantern lighting ceremony seemed more and more inevitable if these were the sort of microaggressions the Jiangs had been fielding from the Jins for all these years.

"No?" Jin Zixun asked as his smile widened. "No, what? No, you're not bothering my cousin's woman? Because that's not how it looks from where *I'm* standing."

"Leave." Lan Zhan's grip on Bichen's sheath tightened and he wondered if he was about to have to defend himself.

"Oh, no, I don't..." Jin Zixun and his cronies froze in place as a snap echoed through the clearing. All of them stared blankly into the empty distance.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying called to him from the path overhead. Jiang Wanyin was standing behind his shoulder with Sandu partially unsheathed.

Lan Zhan leapt upright over the bodies penning him in and landed on a tree branch that he used as a platform to reach the higher footpath. "You may release them now," he told Wei

Ying, looking backwards.

“Once we’re out of sight.” Wei Ying told him. “They’ll forget what they were doing for the past few minutes once I let them go. If they see you they’ll just start over again.”

“This way.” Jiang Wanyin jerked his chin uphill. His face looked blotchy although he seemed unnaturally calm otherwise, for him. He glared down at the Jin hooligans and spat, “*Embarrassing.*”

“Not everyone grew up with me around to play pranks on them, A-Cheng.” Wei Ying said with a kind of fondness that Lan Zhan hated to see, given everything Jiang Wanyin had once done to him. This Jiang Wanyin was not that person, but it was difficult to remember that given how similar they were.

“I meant ganging up on one person...” Jiang Wanyin bristled, but relented after a moment. “...but that too.” he rolled his eyes. “We saw them follow you down the path. What was that about?”

Lan Zhan forced himself to nod in gratitude without glaring. “Territorial posturing.”

“Why do I think that’s oversimplifying it?” Wei Ying mused. He paused as they reached the top of the path and snapped again.

“Thank you for your intervention.” Lan Zhan told him quietly.

“Well, it looks like that’s going to be my job from now on if I’m right about why your uncle asked to see Shijie.” Wei Ying colored and nodded towards his brother. “I blabbed to Jiang Cheng. Sorry. We were actually coming to find you.”

Lan Zhan turned to face Jiang Wanyin who turned sharply, angrily away. He wondered how that conversation had gone. Was the state of his complexion due to a screaming fit or a crying jag? It was hard to tell. He wouldn’t have guessed that Jiang Wanyin would cry at his age, but his eyes *were* suspiciously red. Lan Zhan was sorry to have missed it.

It must have been some sort of emotional storm because Jiang Wanyin didn’t fight it when his older brother put an arm around his shoulder and tousled his hair. In fact, he leaned into it a little bit. It was alarming to watch his nemesis of old basically allow himself to be babied in mixed company so Lan Zhan looked away, that way at least one of them could walk away from this with their dignity intact.

Jiang Wanyin threw Wei Ying off once his vulnerable moment passed and Lan Zhan’s zhiji turned his focus back in the correct direction.

“Are you going to put me out of my misery?” he asked, bumping shoulders with Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan glanced down at the point of contact, but did not move away. “She is giving Shufu and Xiongzhong feedback on the proposal letter.”

“Ha...” Wei Ying stopped walking and leaned over to brace his hands on his knees. “...I thought I was ready to hear that. It still hit.” His smile was much smaller than before, but had

a beautifully tremulous quality that made Lan Zhan's heart clench. "How did you convince him?"

"I don't know," Lan Zhan admitted. "He asked me questions. I answered them honestly. I expected that we would need Jiang-guniang's contingency plan."

Wei Ying chuckled. "You'd look good carrying a fuchen." He sobered. "You might yet."

"Our parents haven't agreed." Jiang Wanyin crossed his arms and looked away. "I don't see why they would. I don't see why Lan Qiren is going along with it. No one else is going to recognize you two."

"Watch me cry about not being recognized by the Jin, Yao, or Ouyang sects," Wei Ying sniffed dismissively. He said it easily enough to tell Lan Zhan he'd been thinking about it as a real possibility with consequences. Lan Zhan's mouth went dry. He thought that he shouldn't be so affected by that, but he was. He *was*.

"Nie will if Lan does and if *we* get away with it there'll be three more marriage announcements from them within the year." Wei Ying elbowed his brother. "You realize there's a reason Nie men are so infamous for never marrying, right? It's not *actually* the poetry of military brotherhood."

Lan Zhan hadn't actually known that. He wondered if his brother did.

Jiang Wanyin's jaw dropped and then snapped shut. "I don't know why I bother with you!" he snarled and stomped off.

"Aiyah!" Wei Ying turned a sly look on Lan Zhan. "Poor us. We're all alone and unchaperoned."

Lan Zhan cocked one eyebrow at his zhiji.

"Jin Zixun and his friends are probably gone by now, is all I mean," Wei Ying said, pasting on an innocent expression. "We won't get a better opportunity than this anytime soon. If you think Shijie's been watching us like a hawk *before* now..."

"Too much talking." Lan Zhan's voice was gruff, but a persistent smirk was tugging at his mouth as he turned to go back the way they'd come.

Jin Zixun and the others had indeed wandered off and Wei Ying cheerfully kicked his shoes off as soon as they reached the shore. Lan Zhan followed at a more decorous pace and tried not to think about his younger self, soaking in the cold water and not questioning his sudden overwhelming need to be covered the second he realized that the footsteps on the path overhead belonged to *him*.

Now, Lan Zhan could acknowledge the feelings behind his fears then of Wei Ying seeing him in any condition other than immaculate. He hadn't shed them entirely, but knew now from experience that Wei Ying wouldn't stop looking his way if he saw Lan Zhan with damp bedraggled hair once.



“Ah, that’s cold!” Wei Ying hissed as he waded in.

“Mn.” Lan Zhan followed him in and didn’t comment or object when Wei Ying crowded in close. *He could have this.*

Even if Jiang-zongzhu or Yu-furen forbade the match, Wei Ying had agreed. His was the only refusal that mattered.

“Do you feel anything?” he asked.

Wei Ying nodded, focused on a distant sound that only he could hear. “It knows we’re here,” he murmured. “It’s fixing to take the bait.”

Having confirmation that the Yin Iron had been the thing to pull them into Cold Water Cave all those years ago was less reassuring than Lan Zhan had hoped. Even back then, it had responded to Wei Ying. He was the first one it had grabbed for.

It did so again this time. Wei Ying went under the water with a curse and Lan Zhan dove after without thinking, even though he knew it was coming. Within a few seconds another tendril of force wrapped around him and yanked him into the hidden cave.

Wei Ying caught him and stopped him from landing head first in the water. They grabbed each other, sputtering and annoyed until Wei Ying looked at him and laughed.

“You even look good like this,” he sighed, still smiling. His eyes were soft and fond. “How is that fair? How are *you* fair?”

Lan Zhan’s hair was stuck in an unattractive tangle across his face. He was sopping wet. He could tell his headband was crooked and when he touched his face a smear of mud came away on his fingers.

Wei Ying was looking at him like he was dressed for a formal banquet.

The last few remaining spiderwebs of his restraint snapped and Lan Zhan surged forward. Wei Ying made a pleasing sound -half gasp and half sigh- as Lan Zhan pushed him back against the slick icy wall of the cave and grabbed him by the hair at the nape of his neck. The way his zhiji went immediately pliant and limp in his grasp lit a fire in Lan Zhan’s belly that eclipsed every other unworthy urge he’d ever smothered in Wei Ying’s presence.

He could not call what he did then a ‘kiss.’ It felt too much like eating his lover alive and the only thing that prevented him from recoiling in horror from himself was Wei Ying’s total and willing surrender to the onslaught. He stopped even trying to stand and silently trusted Lan Zhan to bear his whole weight; another thing Lan Zhan had not expected to like *nearly* so much as he did.

They reluctantly broke for air and Lan Zhan held Wei Ying like that, pinned between the ice and the heat of his own body, with their foreheads touching as they breathed.

“Lan Zhan...” Wei Ying grumbled, still panting. His lips were kiss swollen and it was hard to focus on what he was saying. “...I *promised*.”

“I did not,” Lan Zhan pointed out without remorse.

“Semantics!” Wei Ying melted into their second kiss. He slid an inch or down the wall. Lan Zhan pressed his thigh between Wei Ying’s to prevent him from going further and in doing so discovered more evidence of just how well his attentions were received. Wei Ying turned a fantastic shade of scarlet. “Ignore it!” he shrilled.

“Mn,” Lan Zhan agreed, resisting the urge to press in deeper. For now.

“Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying reached for his shoulder, a little desperate as desire dragged him back under. “You stopped...”

Lan Zhan caught the hand reaching for him and pinned it up above Wei Ying’s head. The other was caught in the material of Lan Zhan’s sleeve and didn’t need to be secured.

The beast in him was still ravenous, but he found it was not the all consuming monster he’d feared it would be. He didn’t want Wei Ying’s pain except inasmuch as Wei Ying enjoyed it - as he seemed to.

Having now had a taste of it, though, Lan Zhan wanted Wei Ying’s delight even more; *all* of it, down to the last scrap with none left for anyone else.

He could take his time with this meal, the rest of his life would not be too long.

“Wei Ying is good,” he murmured, low and almost languid with his desire. “Wei Ying keeps his promises.”

The equally stricken and aroused noise Wei Ying made in response was of *intense* interest to Lan Zhan. Was it praise that had done that? Was it Lan Zhan’s trust? He wanted to experiment with it, but the moment passed when his zhiji tensed in a way that reminded him they were not at leisure.

“Ah, Lan Zhan.” His gaze strayed down the stone tunnel. “It’s trying to get loose.”

Lan Zhan lowered him gently down, vaguely irritated to set Wei Ying’s bare feet down into the icy water. They should have left their shoes on. He reached back to untie his headband.

Wei Ying offered his wrist with a wan smile.

Lan Zhan reflected on the only downside to formalizing an engagement between them as he carefully wound one half of his ribbon around his intended’s wrist and the other half around his own. Soon Wei Ying would understand the significance of this act and he was going to laugh at Lan Zhan about it for the rest of their lives.

That wouldn't be terrible, actually.

Unlike last time, Wei Ying slipped his hand into Lan Zhan’s and laced their fingers together. Such heat bloomed through Lan Zhan’s body that it was a wonder the entire icy cave did not melt.

This time Lan Yi, Lan Zhan's venerated ancestor, was waiting at her guqin with her hand on the strings to still them. She smiled as they approached and bowed to her. Given everything Wei Ying had told him about the nonlinear and alien nature of the afterlife, maybe it shouldn't have surprised him to know that they'd been expected.

"I remember you both," she said and smiled at Wei Ying. "I think *you* understand why. I can hear it all around you."

"Please forgive this student's errors," he apologized. "I do."

"There is no need for forgiveness," she told him, smiling sadly before she rose to touch them both on the cheek in a gesture that felt like a puff of cool breath on Lan Zhan's skin. "You've both grown so much. It's been so long since I got see a young one grow up. This time you must both live longer. I don't want to see you in the place where I will soon go for a long, long time."

She extended her hand out Wei Ying and the Yin Iron fragment appeared floating over it. It all but leapt to him and smacked into his chest.

Wei Ying grimaced, whistled sharply, and the fragment went quiet. It dropped into his palm without further antics.

Lan Zhan recalled the way the Waterborne Abyss had reached for Wei Ying. His brother had always fretted about where it came from in the first place. His uncle had blamed it on the QishanWen, supposing that they'd chased it into Gusu from upstream.

They had plenty of treacherous water crossings in Qishan capable of spawning one, but the other prevailing theory was that the resentful energy bleeding off the Yin Iron into Gusu's waters had found and fed a small seed in Biling lake that wouldn't otherwise have sprouted.

Wei Ying's fate had always been embroiled with the Yin Iron. He could see it now even without the fragment's blatant partisanship.

"Be careful," Lan Yi warned them as she began to fade. "Be very careful."

Lan Zhan led Wei Ying in a final bow and when they rose, she was gone.

As last time, more time had passed outside of Cold Water Cave than had passed inside of it. Lan Zhan unbound their wrists before there was any chance that either of their families would see. Xichen had ignored it last time and later agreed it had been necessary to protect Wei Ying. This time he wouldn't be so understanding.

Wen Qing was standing outside the hidden exit looking bored when they emerged, both soaked to the bone. This time Jiang Wanyin was not present. "What a coincidence," she said in an unconvincing monotone as they approached. "I've found you."

"Very funny," Wei Ying groused.

"Do you have it?" she asked quieter and blew out her breath when Wei Ying nodded. "Be careful. It'll all start now." She glanced over her shoulder. "Your brother wasn't far behind

me, Lan-er-gongzi. Look pathetic, both of you. *Now.* ”

Wei Ying and Lan Zhan were sitting in the grass as Wen Qing monitored their pulses when Lan Xichen approached, caught sight of them, and broke into a run. Jiang Yanli was not far behind, escorted by Jiang Wanyin.

“Wangji!” Xichen slid to a halt at his side. “You’re soaked through!”

“They’re chilled, but not dangerously so,” Wen Qing said coolly. “Their cultivation is sufficient to ward off hypothermia, but they should get dry. They’re both running low enough to be at risk of catching a chill. This one especially.” She pinched Wei Wuxian.

“Ow!” he grouched.

“You deserve it,” she replied, but fell silent as the Jiang siblings caught up.

“A-Xian, where did you go!” Jiang Yanli patted all over Wei Ying’s face and shoulders looking for visible injuries then, to Lan Zhan’s vast alarm, did the same thing to him. “It’s been over a day! I’ve been worried to death!”

“We went to the cold spring.” Wei Ying was the better liar between them so Lan Zhan let him do it. “We fell into an underground cavern and got lost trying to find our way out.”

“You idiots went *back* there?” Jiang Wanyin seethed and pointed his finger right in Wei Ying’s face. Lan Zhan resisted the urge to snap it off at the knuckle. “You liar. You didn’t *fall* in. You were thrown.”

Xichen frowned. “What’s this?”

Jiang Wanyin ratted them out without hesitation. “Jin Zixun and a bunch of outer disciples ganged up on Lan-er-gongzi before I left those two by themselves. He was by that pond when they surrounded him. They must have come back.”

“They didn’t,” Wei Ying interjected. “We were wading. I slipped. Lan Zhan dove after me when I didn’t surface.”

“Lan-gongzi, this conversation should wait until they are dry,” Wen Qing informed Xichen.

Xichen and Jiang Yanli bustled them both away to the main hall where they were both given a fresh change of clothes and winter cloaks to warm up in. Jiang Wanyin followed at a distance to escort Wen Qing more closely. She seemed more receptive to his presence than Lan Zhan recalled from before. He wished them joy of each other.

Lan Zhan waited until Jiang Yanli had left to go make soup and her brother had gone to walk Wen Qing back to her guest house. His uncle had joined them by then. He had never been the type to fuss, but he had also been *conspicuously present* whenever Lan Zhan was injured or ill as a child so maybe he was.

“Wangji,” Xichen phrased his question as delicately as was possible. “Did you --*see* anything when you were underground?”

Here it was. He nodded to Wei Ying, who brought the Yin Iron fragment out of his pocket. Like before, both his uncle and brother recognized it unhappily on sight.

“She couldn’t suppress it any longer,” Wei Ying explained softly, sadly. He’d been a little too excited by the puzzle to let his own sorrow about Lan Yi’s fading presence show before, but this time they both had different priorities and motivations. “I lied out there. Something dragged us into the cave. Your ancestress said it wasn’t her.”

“Uncle, a sealing pouch...” Xichen stared at the Yin Iron fragment like it was a viper.

Wei Ying issued another short order via whistle and it floated obediently out of his hand to hover in the air. Lan Qiren shot him a disturbed look as he pulled a pouch from his sleeve, slid it over the fragment, and drew it tight.

The conversation regarding the Yin Iron was much as Lan Zhan remembered it with the extra dimension of unease regarding Wei Ying’s easy control over it.

“Why did it obey you?” Xichen asked, once the fragment was sealed in another pouch and then inside a warded chest.

“Ah?” Wei Ying winced. “I can hear what it wants. It thinks I’ll give that to it.”

“Do not listen to the resentful energy, boy.” Lan Qiren huffed. “It is mindless in its maliciousness.”

Wei Ying just shook his head. “Not the resentful energy. The Yin Iron,” he clarified. “They’re two separate entities in there. The Yin Iron is a mineral. Resentful energy is an animal sort of thing. The iron was infected with a near inexhaustible supply of it. The ghosts trapped inside by Xue Chonghai are mindless wellsprings of hatred by now, but the Yin Iron is a distinct presence of its own.”

“You can hear them too?” Lan Zhan edged closer to his zhiji. There was a furrow starting to show between his brows that suggested he could and it hurt. “Like the Shui Gui at the lake?”

“A bit.” Wei Ying rolled his shoulders. “Nothing concrete. Just insane muttering. It’s more annoying than anything else.”

“What does it want?” Xichen exchanged a look with their uncle.

“Basically?” Wei Ying cast a look on the warded chest that Lan Zhan didn’t like. It looked entirely too sympathetic. “To die.”

“Wei-gongzi, may we backtrack?” Xichen came to kneel in front of where Wei Ying sat. He had his ‘xiongzhang is *concerned*’ expression on and for once Lan Zhan was not the long suffering recipient of it. “How long have you been able to hear ghosts? Why have you not mentioned it before?”

Wei Ying colored. “Well, I could sometimes when I was little,” he coughed. “It wasn’t all that uncommon in Yiling. Everyone heard voices a little bit; distant muttering, someone suddenly

saying your name, that sort of thing. It quit when I was taken to Lotus Pier. It started again... recently.”

Xichen looked towards their uncle. “Shufu?”

Lan Qiren stroked his beard and contemplated Wei Ying. “He’s about the right age for that sort of thing to surface,” he said after a while. “Your mother never knew her people, Wei-gongzi. It’s not impossible that she came from a line that produces mediums.” He frowned as though at a memory. “She was a great believer in intuition and correct more often than she should have been, but given the timing it’s more likely a symptom of your core damage reacting to the concentrated resentful energy of the...” he paused and corrected himself with irritation, “...or rather *attached to* the Yin Iron. After this you will report to the medical pavilion to be re-examined.” He stroked his beard and continued reluctantly on, “*Can* a mineral die?”

Wei Ying nodded slowly. “The Yin Iron can. It has a spiritual presence like divine steel, but larger and more complex. It’s not very compatible with humans,” he said. “I *think* it’s supposed to be serving a purpose and it can’t do that right now. Lan Yi said it grew naturally in the earth. It might be that no more Yin Iron can form until this bit is gone. I’m guessing at a lot of this. It definitely thinks that a disaster is imminent if it isn’t either cleansed or destroyed, but it’s concept of time is different than ours. It thinks in terms of geological age. Its idea of immediate danger could be thousands or tens of thousands of years away.”

“Then we have time to workshop a solution,” Xichen sighed. “Shufu, we’ll need to discuss this with the other sect leaders.”

“Hm.” Lan Qiren pointed at the door. “Wangji, take Wei-gongzi to the medical pavilion. Report back to me with what they find. You are both excused from lectures for the afternoon. Take time to rest. Do not discuss the events in Cold Water Cave with anyone else.”

The both saluted and Lan Zhan took his unenthused zhiji to the medical pavilion yet again.

As he left, he chanced to overhear his uncle mutter, “At least this happened *now* while QishanWen is too busy with own business to bother us,” along with his brother’s affirmative hum.

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The doctors found nothing else wrong with Wei Ying’s golden core, which was a relief. Wei Ying’s own theory was that the whispers were a side effect of having been dead; one that Lan Zhan himself had missed out on. It seemed tiring so he wasn’t sorry that he had.

Jin Zixun made several attempts to corner him again over the following week, which Lan Zhan either thwarted or ignored outright.

Jiang Yanli fretted over him fully as much as her own brothers. He had not had the honor of receiving her oft-mentioned soup before, but that respite was at an end. He was now required to take lunch in the Jiang guest house and was served alongside Wei Ying and Jiang Wanyin. She left him covered cups of it left steaming gently outside the Jingshi if he was unavailable

to attend. She straightened his collars and commented on his complexion. It seemed he was pale enough for her to worry that he didn't get enough protein.

It made him miss his mother even more sharply than usual, but he found the attention welcome at the same time.

At the end of the week, as Qixi approached, a delegation arrived from Jiang. At the head of the group was Jiang Fengmian. At his side was Yu Ziyuan.

Lan Zhan was not present when they arrived as it happened during morning lectures. One of his sect sisters arrived to quietly pull Jiang Yanli out of her seat and take her away. When his uncle ended his lecture early and handed class off to one of the junior scholars, he knew what had occurred.

He happened to see Jiang Yanli escorting her parents around the common gardens surrounding the main building. Jiang-zongzhu had visited Cloud Recesses before so Lan Zhan knew his face. Yu-furen was a new acquaintance. They'd never met before her death and by all accounts he'd had a narrow miss.

She was classically beautiful with shrewd, sharp eyes and a vicious slash of a mouth. Lan Zhan recognized the ring on her dominant hand all too well.

Yu-furen paused at the Wall of Discipline and asked her daughter a pointed question he was not close enough to overhear. Jiang Yanli's answer seemed to please her mother and they continued on after she took a moment to skim through it.

That they'd appeared at all was a hopeful sign, but Lan Zhan remembered that half the reason Jiang Fengmian in his memories had appeared to take custody of his children was a thinly veiled excuse for GusuLan and YunmengJiang to discuss the problem of the Yin Iron without QishanWen getting immediately suspicious.

He did not attend the afternoon meal with the Jiangs that day. It was one thing to eat with people his own age, but they would be with their parents and sect leaders. It would be impertinent to show his face at the guest houses and detrimental to his overall goals.

He still wanted to go.

Jiang Wanyin had perked up at the mention of his parents, but Wei Ying turned pale and quiet. The last time he'd seen either of them would have been when he found their corpses. Even so, he seemed *too* affected.

"Wangji." Xichen found him at the pine overlook. He had that look on his face. "Are you nervous?"

Lan Zhan replied with a flat stare.

"I'll interpret that as 'very'," his brother chuckled. "I was on my way to make sure they were comfortable. I would like to introduce you informally while we're at it. Will you come?"

There could be only one answer to that. He needed to see Wei Ying and know that he was alright.

The guest house gardens were deserted when they approached, despite the fact that there were usually guest disciples loitering around preparing for or walking off their meals. The reason for it became clear the closer they got.

Yu-furen's voice was muffled enough by the walls so that the entire dressing down was not audible, but Lan Zhan could pick out the words she hit hardest on. 'Disgrace' featured prominently. He also heard the word 'farce' spoken with such vitriol that he had to start reciting in his head before he did something Wei Ying would regret.

The lines of Xichen's face grew tighter and less happy with every passing moment. When it became clear that this would not be a short lecture, he reached out to tap the door with Shuoye's hilt.

Inside Yu-furen's voice subsided and after a moment a Jiang cultivator that Lan Zhan did not know came to answer the door.

"Zewu-jun." The man recognized Xichen and saluted to them both. "Lan-er-gongzi."

"We have come to see if Jiang-zongzhu and Yu-furen are comfortably settled and to invite them to dine at the main hall this evening." Xichen's voice gave away no hints that they'd walked in on a private family matter.

"Please enter." The cultivator led them inside.

Wei Ying was part way through rising from where he'd been kneeling in the middle of the room. From Yu-furen's position she must have been circling him while she spoke. Jiang-zongzhu sat at the tea table looking tired with Jiang Yanli at his side. She appeared to have been in the middle of pouring for her parents. There was an abandoned cup where Yu-furen would have been sitting. Jiang Wanyin stood back to the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and a tight expression on his face. Something that might have been relief chased across his features when he saw Xichen and Lan Zhan appear.

When Lan Zhan glanced at Wei Ying there was no expression on his face at all. He was just... blank. Absent.

Any plans Lan Zhan had had for spending meaningful amounts of time at Lotus Pier *evaporated*.

"Zewu-jun." Jiang-zongzhu and Yu-furen came over to perform the polite necessities, which Lan Zhan and his brother returned with technical precision.

"I came to make my younger brother known to you." Xichen had retreated behind the calm mask he employed in similar situations. Lan Zhan wondered if he too was swiftly recalculating his future plans with these in-laws.



"I am Lan Zhan." Lan Zhan bowed as courteously as he could. He would not be the one to ruin this opportunity. He would take Wei Ying away if necessary. After that scene Xichen would hardly fight him, but he wanted Wei Ying as his proper husband. "Courtesy name, Wangji."

"The second Jade of Lan. Well met." Jiang-zongzhu looked him over, at least willing to not dismiss him out of hand. "Your reputation precedes you already at such a young age."

"So you're the one?" Yu-furen commented rather more tartly. "What good does your reputation do your clan when you're willing to throw it away?"

That brought a little life back into Wei Ying. His face swung slowly in Yu-furen's direction with an expression Lan Zhan had last seen on it right before fifty cultivators died. He caught Wei Ying's eye and shook his head. The darkness in his zhiji's gaze faded to be replaced with something that put Lan Zhan into the killing mood instead; despair.

"Let that be a concern for GusuLan," Xichen replied. "My uncle would prefer to be included in any further discussion on this topic. If your accommodations are acceptable then Wangji and I must excuse ourselves. May we expect to see you for the evening meal at the Main Hall?"

"Yes, thank you." Jiang-zongzhu escorted them to the door himself and let them out.

Lan Zhan and Xichen were silent until they'd almost reached the Hanshi.

"Be patient," Xichen said as Lan Zhan began to take himself away to the Jingshi for a while so he could put himself back together. "Uncle is every bit her equal when something he wants is on the line," he chuckled, mood improving upon the mystified look Lan Zhan gave him. "The chance to add a powerful musical cultivator to the sect's lineage, the opportunity to swipe a young and reliable medium out from under Yu Ziyuan's nose, your happiness; pick one. He'll fight for it."

That last was suspect, given his uncle's behavior in Lan Zhan's other life. He didn't trust it enough to put weight on it when his back still remembered the cut of a discipline whip.

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The formal dinner was excruciating and saved only the proscription against speaking during meals in Cloud Recesses; a rule that Lan Zhan had not been particular about enforcing during the past week with the younger Jiangs, but was *unbearably* grateful for now.

Wei Ying was still to the point where even Lan Zhan's uncle noticed. No one missed the occasional dark looks he received from Yu-furen or the way his siblings could quite take their eyes off him. Everything about their dynamic held the promise of later violence.

"Thank you for hosting us." He inclined his head to Lan Qiren in gratitude. He looked to Wei Ying. "I think that the young people should retire for the evening. A-Cheng, A-Li, would you escort your mother to..."

“Where do you think *I’m* going?” Yu-furen told her husband with an acid look. “What do *you* know of these things?”

A slight flush travelled up Jiang-zongzhu’s neck. Lan Zhan could not tell if it was anger or embarrassment. There was no clue in his tone when he replied. “I am always grateful for your company, wife.”

Yu-furen’s snort said that she very much doubted that.

Xichen squeezed Lan Zhan’s shoulder before he followed them deeper into the Main Hall.

“I packed you a bag.” Jiang Cheng said to Wei Ying as soon as they were outside. “It’s in the tree behind the guest house in case you have to run tonight.”

Lan Zhan bristled until Wei Ying wheezed in what turned out to be a laugh. He turned and hugged his brother. Jiang Wanyin struggled just enough to put on a show, but not actually get loose and Lan Zhan realized this was Jiang Wanyin’s extremely oblique way of giving them his blessing even if his parents did not.

“Oh.” Jiang Yanli blushed and cupped her cheeks. “I put mine under one of the hollow stools around the table outside.”

The tense thing that had been crouched in Lan Zhan’s chest since he’d first heard Yu-furen’s voice through that door uncoiled. Wei Ying met his gaze when he turned away from Jiang Wanyin, present for the first time since that morning.

Jiang Yanli took her brothers back to the guest house. Lan Zhan lingered outside the main hall. It was not yet curfew. He could wait wherever he liked and if the negotiators emerged without coming to an agreement then he could reach the guest houses long before they would. By the time Jiang-zongzhu and Yu-furen returned, they’d be gone.

Time crawled on.

Xichen emerged first and by the way he looked around, he was searching for Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan stepped out from behind the tree he’d been waiting under and the breath died in his lungs when Xichen -- *smiled*.

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Wedding ceremonies varied between sects. Most cultivators observed the same wedding customs as the upper classes among common people with a few additional ceremonies unique to their sects.

Normally there would be a matchmaker involved to facilitate the negotiations and screening the candidates for compatibility, but their families ended up getting much of that out of the way during the process of agreeing to the match at all. Lan Zhan hadn’t been informed of the exact terms of his marriage, only that it would proceed pending one final barrier.

Since the Jiangs were in Gusu anyway, exchanging horoscopes was a quick process with favorable results. The astrologer in Caiyi confirmed what Lan Zhan already knew.

Lan Zhan, his uncle, and his brother sat on one side of the receiving hall. The Jiangs and Wei Ying sat on the other. Yu-furen did not seem to be particularly thrilled to be there, but was pleased enough by whatever concessions she'd pried out of his uncle for YunmengJiang that she had very little to say.

The astrologer sat in the center of the room in front of Lan Zhan's uncle and Wei Ying's adopted father.

"Extremely compatible!" the old man informed the assembled cultivators. He drew a sheet of paper with his findings out of his case and presented it for review. "I have assembled a list of auspicious dates if you honored Daozhangs would care to choose."

Jiang Yanli nudged her sibling's shoulder with a smile.

Wei Ying caught his eye from across the room with a slow sleepy smile that reminded Lan Zhan of their interlude together in Cold Water Cave.

*He could have this.*

Once the astrologer had been paid and gifted appropriately, Lan Zhan's uncle cleared his throat. "I will now explain the terms of this union." He looked back and forth between Lan Zhan and Wei Ying. "It is our decision that Wei Wuxian will marry into GusuLan sect."

Wei Ying stilled, conflicted for the first time. Jiang Wanyin's stricken inhale was audible throughout the room. Jiang Yanli looked less surprised, but she had been promised to Jin sect a long time ago. She'd had longer to come to terms with the fact that she wouldn't always have her brothers immediately at hand.

A savage look of pleasure crossed Yu-furen's face and Lan Zhan understood then why she'd agreed to the match. She took one look at the Wall of Discipline and thought the same thing his uncle did; that Wei Ying would *never* survive in Cloud Recesses.

"That said, Wei Wuxian is the first disciple of YunmengJiang and cannot be fully spared," his uncle continued, tugging irritably on his beard. At that, Yu-furen's pleasure visibly subsided. "Therefore, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian will be granted a house in Yunmeng. They will reside there four months out of the year and during that time they will be at the disposal of Jiang-zongzhu. They will reside in and serve at Cloud Recesses during the rest of the year. This union will be fully recognized as legitimate by both YunmengJiang and GusuLan. Neither party will be permitted to take additional wives or..." There he cleared his throat. "...husbands." Red started to creep up his face and Jiang-zongzhu took pity on him.

"A-Xian, the Lan Disciplines forbid your betrothed from taking any concubines," he explained. "Given the circumstances, GusuLan is willing to accept it if you both choose to bring a *single* surrogate into your union. She would need to live primarily in Yunmeng, but she would have the same rights and welcome that any daughter-in-law should expect from Jiang Sect."

Yu-furen's expression told Lan Zhan that welcome would be cold indeed. It was just as well that Lan Zhan was thoroughly unwilling to share Wei Ying with anyone. That would be a

cruel thing to do to any woman, assuming they met one who'd even be willing to accept such an arrangement.

"Adoption is also acceptable." Lan Qiren informed them, pinning first Lan Zhan and then Wei Ying under his gaze, making it clear that GusuLan was not *actually* willing to accept any such 'surrogate' despite his earlier concerns about continuation of the main family line. Lan Zhan had an embarrassment of second cousins and his uncle would elevate *all* of them before he'd tolerate either of his nephews or his nephew-in-law taking *concubines*.

Wei Ying was scarlet-faced and only managed a nod. Lan Zhan too nodded his agreement.

"As you're both men and your service will be divided between your sects there will be no discussion of dowries or betrothal gifts outside of what you choose to give each other," Jiang-zongzhu continued. "Your monthly stipends will be paid wherever you are residing at the time. Your children will be required to choose a sect when they come of age, but will be allowed to reside with you wherever you are until then."

Things were very businesslike from there. A betrothal letter was drafted, signed, and surrendered to Jiang-zongzhu. Likewise they formalized the marriage terms in a contract and drafted Lan sect's welcome letter for Wei Ying in the very same sitting.

It was rushed, even by GusuLan's austere standards, and Lan Zhan discovered why when the final document was signed and put carefully away.

"Will you take A-Li and A-Cheng back to the guest houses?" Jiang Fengmian asked his wife quietly. "We will explain the next stages to the boys."

Yu-furen nodded and rose to her feet. "Children, with me."

"What?" Jiang Wanyin quailed under his mother's glare. "Yes, ma'am." He bowed in apology and shot his brother an equally sorry look.

Lan Zhan and Wei Ying were permitted to move their seats closer to the front of the room and to sit next to each other.

"I would like to start with an apology, A-Xian..." Jiang-zongzhu nodded to include Lan Zhan. "...and Wangji, if you will permit me to address you as your family does."

Lan Zhan nodded, well aware he wasn't really in a position to refuse his father-in-law anything.

"This should be a happy time, but we have a favor to ask." Xichen chimed in. "Would you be willing to divide your wedding into two parts? You would be married first at Cloud Recesses according to our custom, but in a private ceremony. There will be a second more traditional wedding held later at Lotus Pier and that is the one we will announce to the other Sects and invite guests to."

"I don't see any reason to refuse." Wei Ying checked in with Lan Zhan with a glance. "Why?"

“It’s in regards to the Yin Iron.” Lan Zhan’s uncle exchanged a look with Xichen. “The fragment you found is struggling within the seals we placed on it. It’s reacting to something else, probably another piece that is being used out in the world. It’s likely that the other fragments will soon start to escape their protections.”

“QishanWen is mercifully occupied with their own problems right now,” Jiang-zongzhu told them. “You boys will not have heard this, but Qishan has been rocked by a series of natural disasters this past year; crop blights, landslides, and now there’s worry that the volcano underneath Nightless City is waking up after being dormant for the past two hundred years.”

Lan Zhan kept careful control of his features and he noticed Wei Ying struggle not to send him questioning looks. *No* such thing had happened in his memories. Just how ‘natural’ were those ‘natural disasters’, he wondered, and just how far did their mysterious benefactor’s reach extend?

“Wen-zongzhu isn’t likely to care about any of that, but even he can only ignore his own sect’s problems for so long,” Jiang-zongzhu continued. “We do know he’s been searching quietly for the other pieces of the Yin Iron. He can’t put all his resources into it now, but even a reduced effort by QishanWen is formidable.”

“We want you two to take the fragment you found in the Cold Water Cave and use it to locate any pieces that Wen Ruohan has not,” Xichen said. “We suspect he only has one; the one placed into the care of his ancestor, Wen Mao. Between our fragment and Wei-gongzi’s sensitivity to its spiritual cognition, we are hopeful that we can remove the remaining fragments from Wen Ruohan’s reach,” he paused and coughed. “Given that you would be travelling alone, Shufu and I would prefer it if you two were married first. The hand-tying ceremony is too somber for most and very rarely attended by representatives of the other sects. No one will be offended so long as a second ceremony is held and they receive invitations.”

Xichen made no mention of how likely anyone would be to *accept* those invitations, but *not* sending any would be its own flavor of insult.

“Hand tying?” Wei Ying turned very slowly to stare at Lan Zhan.

Lan Qiren looked back and forth between them, instantly suspicious. For some reason his attention settled on Lan Zhan.

“Your ears are the reddest I’ve ever seen them,” Wei Ying observed in delight.

“*Wangji!*” his uncle barked.

Xichen meanwhile pressed a hand to his forehead. “The guqin defending Cold Water Cave,” he realized out loud while Jiang Fengmian stared at them all in confusion.

“Shameless!” His uncle bristled. “What would you have done if we hadn’t come to an agreement?”

“It’s only binding if both parties enter into it with fully informed consent.” Xichen hurried to smooth their uncle’s ruffled feathers. “He could hardly leave Wei-gongzi undefended.”

That got through and Lan Qiren subsided, still annoyed yet unable to mount a counter argument.

Wei Ying cleared his throat. “Wuxian' is alright," he said into the uncomfortable silence. “If Lan Zhan is fine with Jiang-shushu using his name, then I’m happy if you want to use mine.”

It was exactly the right move. Xichen did not beam as a general rule, but he exuded fraternal pleasure as he agreed, “*Wuxian*.” He smiled, back on even footing. “As I said. The hand tying ceremony is very plain, but I think we can manage something better than a cave with no witnesses.”

Lan Qiren turned to Lan Zhan after the more pedestrian aspects of their planning session was over and Jiang-zongzhu had taken his adopted son back to the guest houses.

“Copy all of the Virtues," he told Lan Zhan in a voice that brooked no argument, not that Lan Zhan would have offered one. “Also the section in Conduct specifically pertaining to the behavior expected of an unmarried gentleman. *It seems* that you are in need of a *refresher*.”

“Shufu.” Lan Zhan bowed in acquiescence, but not repentance.

## Chapter End Notes

Pour one out for LQR, who has encountered LWJ's Stubborn Asshole mode several years earlier than he would have in canon.

Press F in chat to pay respect to JC who has had a VERY long day.

No respect or sympathy for LWJ. He's getting everything he wants. He's fine.

Where are all the Buff Gays in Cultivation Society? QingheNie. There's also a bunch of Buff Straights and Buff Asexuals (we see you, NMJ) so there's plenty of representation in Qinghe, it's just hard to see past all the facial hair and muscles.

Also:

Not necessarily a 'Conversations I had with my roommate while writing this' bit, but ever since I wrote this my roommate has been using 'The Poetry of Military Brotherhood' as shorthand for gay subtext in things we are watching or reading and I'm kind of smug about it.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Continuing the grand wuxia tradition of flirting via poetry.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Qixi came and with it the lantern lighting ceremony that marked the official end of the guest lectures. They had not officially worked together to make a lantern the first time. Lan Zhan had crafted a frame while pretending not to notice that Wei Ying was painting. It was just a coincidence that they finished at the same time. At the time, Lan Zhan had been only just barely ready to transition from barely contained hostility into something approaching horseplay with Wei Ying.

It hadn't gone especially well and Nie-er-gongzi's lantern had paid the price.

*This* time they had no need to pretend. Wei Ying painted two rabbits on the lantern paper; one black and one white. Lan Zhan made no attempt to hide the way he was using Wei Ying's drawing to gauge the dimensions of his lantern frame.

It was a fine lantern and it flew high, carrying their wishes into the sky.

Wei Ying didn't wish out loud. Neither did Lan Zhan. He suspected they'd made the same wish anyway.

Not everything was quite so peaceful. Jin Zixuan was on his dignity about something and for whatever reason had decided to pretend his fiancée didn't exist. She built a lantern with Jiang Cheng, unlike what had happened in Lan Zhan's memories. He supposed they had Jin Zixun's filthy mind and even filthier mouth to thank for that.

No fight occurred, but not because Jin Zixun didn't try. He attempted several times to get Lan Zhan alone or, preferably, alone with Jin Zixun and five of Jin Zixun's closest cronies. He left the event frustrated because no amount of bad behavior could ruin Lan Zhan's mood.

That evening, he and Wei Ying knelt in front of each other surrounded by family on either side. Their elders -Lan Qiren, Jiang-zongzhu, and Yu-furen sat at the head of the room.

He and Wei Ying dressed in plain dark blue robes with minimal ornamentation. In GusuLan the wedding was often considered a brief, but annoying impediment to the real goal of *being* married and was designed to be gotten over with as quickly as possible, unlike everywhere else where the wedding was a goal in and of itself. Even their wedding clothes were one of several sets handed down through generations of Lan Sect so no one even needed to wait on a seamstress.

Lan Zhan had been told as a child that on *this* subject, no one in his family had ever been at all inclined to wait a second longer than they had to. He hadn't really understood that or why the elders indulged it. There was an *entire* section of the Disciplines dedicated to patience. Why did it suddenly not apply?

*Now* he understood. Why could the guests not all sit down *faster*?

He and Wei Ying held hands as everyone settled and whispered to one another. His entire world had narrowed down to the feel of his betrothed's thumb brushing back and forth across his knuckles so he missed what was going on at the entrance until his side of the hall went deathly quiet. The Jiangs went silent in response and the entire room was overcome by a hush so deep that Yu-furen's whisper to her husband fell into it like a shout.

"For *this* he finally crawls out of his hole?"

Lan Zhan turned his head to see a face he hadn't been confronted with since his name day an entire lifetime ago.

His father, Qingheng-jun, stood just inside the hall. Conceptually, Lan Zhan had known that he was alive; that being sent back in time meant that he'd gotten his father back too --except he'd never really *had* his father to begin with so the distinction was merely academic.

If he'd mourned as a teenager it had been mostly out of confusion. He didn't know how he felt about Qingheng-jun and had eventually dealt with it by putting the man out of his mind.

It wasn't until he found himself facing the man down the length of a wedding hall that he realized something.

Qingheng-jun carried himself inside with the same remote and icy dignity as a mountain peak. He was dressed well in the official robes of a sect leader despite the fact that he had not actually fulfilled that role in over two decades, having left it first to his brother and then his eldest son.

Xichen went to intercept him with a formal salute. "Father, we..." he stopped and chose different words. "...thank you for coming."

Lan Zhan watched him turn towards them and a pair of eyes with an expression in them that he knew only too well.

"This way." Xichen hauled him away before anyone had to come up with something to say.

Qingheng-jun did not comment when a cushion had to be found for him or when the other elders had to shuffle around to make room for him. He knelt between Jiang-zongzhu and his brother. He ignored the acid look Yu-furen shot him like she didn't exist.

"Is that what you're going to look like in ten years?" Wei Ying asked as a quiet aside.

Lan Zhan looked at his father one more time and admitted, "Yes." It was like looking into a mirror, right down to the bitter twist of his mouth. The only difference was that his father was no longer wearing mourning white, or if he did then he'd set it aside for today.



The one good thing about his father's sudden appearance was that the assembled company settled down and Xichen was able to start the ceremony.

It was short.

Lan Zhan removed his headband and surrendered it to his brother who took it and wrapped the ends around their joined hands. If Wei Ying had been a full member of Lan then one of his parents or siblings would have done the same for their other hand. Instead Xichen dropped a pale blue veil over their heads and everyone began to clap. This was an adaptation of the usual ceremony, which had heretofore featured a bride who would arrive veiled and stay that way until they were escorted into the marriage chamber.

Their parents had been unable to agree as to who should enter the event in the veil and Xichen resolved the argument by veiling them both as part of the ceremony.

The thin gauze turned the rest of the world hazy and indistinct. The only real thing left was the man in front of him who was now his husband. Xichen helped them stand and led them through their bows.

From there, they were escorted to the Jingshi; Xichen on Lan Zhan's side, Jiang Yanli leading Wei Ying on the other side, and their joined hands between them.

Wei Ying blew out his breath so hard the veil billowed in front of his face as soon as the door closed behind them. "We did it," he wheezed. "It actually happened!"

Lan Zhan lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss into his husband's knuckles. He took careful note of the way Wei Ying's darkened a few seconds before he threw the veil off their heads.

It drifted slowly to the ground off to one side as Lan Zhan tackled him backwards.

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"So, just for comparison..." Wei Ying asked much later -flushed, sweat damp, and happily sprawled across Lan Zhan's chest. "...how useless was the advice you got yesterday? Jiang-shushu apologized that he had no advice to offer and wasn't able to find anyone who'd admit to having some in order to ask them."

Lan Zhan considered the two discussions he'd had to endure regarding his future marital duties. "My uncle explained that intercourse is strictly for the purpose of procreation and that, as our union won't be fruitful, he left a new weiqi board and some sheet music by my desk for us as a wedding gift so we wouldn't be bored tonight after having to retire so early in the evening."

Wei Ying hid his face in the crook of Lan Zhan's shoulder and snickered. "Jiang Cheng tried to buy some books off Nie Huaisang, but he lost them all during the last room check. He told me I was on my own."

As if he'd ever have any advice to offer. By the time Lan Zhan died, Jiang Cheng had been blacklisted by what seemed to be every single matchmaker willing to work in cultivation

society.

“Mn.” Lan Zhan slid his fingers through his husband’s loose hair. It would be difficult to see him with it down from now on without thinking of them together like this. “Xichen also apologized for his lack of practical advice to offer us, but offered me some reference materials he recently came into possession of.”

“You’re *joking*.” Wei Ying pushed himself up onto his elbows, eyes bright as he looked around for where Lan Zhan had put them away. They were under the floorboards for this exact reason. “*Where?* Is the Collection of Beauties in there? I never got to finish that one.”

Lan Zhan reeled him back in so he could prove that they didn’t need any supplemental study material *quite* yet.

---

They slipped out of Cloud Recesses early the following morning. Wei Ying was groggy from the early morning and a bit annoyed by the elaborate silver guan Xichen had guilted him into promising to wear. It wasn’t one of the *heaviest* pieces reserved for married-in spouses in the main clan. Those weren’t suitable for travel, but it was more elaborate than anything Wei Ying had voluntarily worn anywhere Lan Zhan had ever been able to see.

“I thought you just liked wearing this stuff,” he grouched. “I didn’t know it was a *rule*.”

Lan Zhan *did* enjoy wearing his family’s heirloom jewelry. He just liked it even better on Wei Ying.

Lan Qiren had relaxed several of the family rules of dress for Wei Ying specifically, but not that one. He wasn’t required to wear a headband since they functioned as a sort of spiritual tool. The only alterations Wei Ying had to make to his wardrobe was to remove any hint of red, which he’d mournfully set aside to save for the part of the year when they were in Yunmeng.

Wei Ying glanced his way as they walked towards the river dock that would take them away from Caiyi. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you wear colors.” He reached over to let one of the ribbons trailing down from Lan Zhan’s lapel slip across his fingers. A shiver chased its way down Lan Zhan’s spine. “You were still in white for your father by the end.”

He wore white for Wei Ying too afterwards and never stopped, but did not say so. It was no longer important.

“Looks like we’ve got company.” Wei Ying murmured, jerking his chin ahead.

A figure in brilliant red stood waiting for them at the pier. She was alone, surprisingly.

“Isn’t that a Lan sect heirloom?” Wen Qing observed as they approached, squinting at the gray moonstones set into Wei Ying’s guan.

“Yes.” Lan Zhan did not clarify.

She gave him a suspicious glance. “What did you two do?” She asked.

“Where is Wen Chao?” Lan Zhan ignored her.

“I don’t know.” Wen Qing crossed her arms. “My escort didn’t arrive to collect me. No one’s heard anything. I haven’t seen any sign of the dire owl. Things are changing.”

“Where’s Wen Ning?” Wei Ying asked, which seemed to be a more agreeable subject for Wen Qing.

“I sent him ahead to evacuate the village.” She relaxed minutely. “They’ve relocated to the south. I’ll be leaving to join them soon.”

“Ah.” Wei Ying wilted slightly. “You’re leaving?”

Wen Qing nodded. “We are cutting ties with QishanWen --assuming there will be a QishanWen to cut ties with by this time next year. When you come, look for the Feng clan. We’ll be waiting.” She softened it with a very faint smile that faded as she moved on, “Have you heard about the Old Man underneath Nightless City?”

“The volcano. Shufu mentioned when we were sent out.” Wei Ying looked to Lan Zhan. “Did it ever erupt while you were alive, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Zhan shook his head. “Never in fourteen years.”

“The landslides aren’t rumors nor the failed crops nor the strange swamp spreading across orchard country.” Wen Qing informed them. “Someone is determined to cut the legs out from under Wen Ruohan.”

“They are doing a *very* good job of it too,” Wei Ying agreed. “Are you coming with us?”

“No.” She fixed Lan Zhan with a sharp look. “*You*. We need to talk.” She flicked her fingers at Wei Ying. “Go on ahead. Don’t listen in.”

“Wen Qing!” Wei Ying backed off with his hands up when she pulled out a needle. “Going!”

She watched to make sure he went and threw a needle at the feet of the inevitable eavesdropping paperman that tried to sneak back the way he left.

“Do you want to keep him?” she asked as soon as they were alone. “We don’t have more than a few minutes before he tries something I can’t counter. Answer now.”

“Yes.” Lan Zhan didn’t have to consider it.

“Then if you see Wen Zhuliu, you need to *kill* him. He’ll be in the company of my cousin as his bodyguard and enforcer,” she spoke in low clipped syllables. “If Lotus Pier falls then you’ll lose Wei Wuxian. If he stops using Suibian then you’ll know you’ve failed. Do. Not. Fail.” A glint of gold from between her fingertips suggested what would happen if he did.

“What are you talking about?” Lan Zhan asked, alarmed.

“That’s as much as I can say.” Wen Qing turned her back on him. “It’s up to you now.”

Wei Ying was waiting for him in the boat and looking suspicious when Lan Zhan caught up to him. "What did she tell you?" he asked, looking painfully suspicious. Whatever it was Wen Qing had tried to warn him about was on his mind.

If Lan Zhan pushed him on the subject they'd be guaranteed to fight on their first full day of being married. He didn't want that.

"She told me to kill Wen Zhuliu if we meet him." Lan Zhan watched his husband's face relax.

"That..." Wei Ying nodded to himself. "...is *definitely* something we should do," he sighed. "Along with everything *else* we need to accomplish."

"Mn," Lan Zhan agreed, pushing them off the pier.

"At least we know where we're going," Wei Ying sighed as he wrote a charm and slapped it on the back of the boat. The bow of their vessel lifted slightly out of the water as the wind charm propelled them forward. Lan Zhan went to sit next to his husband and relaxed when Wei Ying automatically leaned into his side. "First up, Tanzhou."

---

It was almost *insultingly* easy.

Lan Zhan saw no sign of Wen Chao or any of the Wen forces. There was no misleading letter from the Flower Maiden in the city center and when they reached the Flower Mansion the gardens were still in full bloom.

Wei Ying got about two steps inside before a wind full of flower petals caught him right in the face. "Aiyah!" he laughed, spluttering. "She remembers me! Have mercy, fair lady! I'm a married man now."

A disbelieving, yet feminine noise echoed through the garden.

"It's true!" He reached over to pull Lan Zhan forward. "See? I'm an honest man now. He's a better poet than me. You'll like him."

"You've visited here before?" Lan Zhan asked and Wei Ying nodded.

"She grants a flower to anyone who recites well. The fragrance lasts for years and the bloom never fades," he explained. "Mine is still in my room at Lotus Pier. I'll show it to you when we get there."

"What did you recite?"

"'Immortals at the Magpie Bridge', but I did it badly and she kept throwing me out until she slipped and showed me her face." Another wind full of petals blasted him again, but neither of them were thrown out.

Wei Ying caught a handful of them and brought them up to his face with a thoughtful noise. Then he went over to the nearest garden bed -lush pink and white peonies- and knelt down in

front of it. He thrust his fingers into the soil and then brought out Xiaodan to play a few experimental notes. They were the shrill tones Lan Zhan remembered from Chenqing, but only a few shreds of black fog slipped over the wall in response to Wei Ying's call then they were sucked down into the soil.

"Ah!" Wei Ying rocked back on his heels. "The flowers feed on resentful energy! That's why it's here."

'It' being the Yin Iron.

Lan Zhan looked around at the lush blooming garden surrounding them. You could hardly see the structure of the Flower Mansion for all the climbing vines and trellises. "What will happen to the garden when the fragment is removed?" He remembered everything had been withered and brown by the time they'd arrived in Tanzhou before.

"The plantings here are used to rich feeding." Wei Ying stroked his chin and called out. "Fair Lady, we need to take the Yin Iron away from this place. It's not safe anymore. Can anything replace it?"

There was quiet in response, but then Lan Zhan spotted a flicker of a woman's sleeve turning around the corner of a pergola of draping wisteria. Wei Ying leapt to his feet.

"Let's go!" He said and raced after her.

The flower maiden led them to a corner of her mansion. The plantings there were denser and less composed, but Lan Zhan could see a sword at the heart of it; a divine steel sword. The metal was blackened and ugly, but spiritually it felt inert. It had been so thoroughly drained of the trace remnants of its previous owner that it was practically new again. To his surprise, he recognized it.

"Gengxin." Lan Zhan had seen an illustration of it once in an older compendium of famous weapons.

"Ah." Wei Ying thumbed his nose to hide his dismay. "I thought Xue Chonghai's sword was destroyed when he was executed?"

"It was." Lan Zhan reached out to test the visible surface, but the metal crumbled under his touch. It wasn't fully rusted, but it would go to pieces if anyone tried to remove it from its prison. "Plants and decay are powerful allies in nature. They consume everything in the end or break it down to dust. You said resentful energy is an organic phenomenon. That must be the original purpose of the Flower Mansion."

"Swords, hm?" Wei Ying mused, sounding thoughtful. "*Angry* swords." He grinned. "Fair Lady, how long can your garden survive without the Yin Iron? I'm sorry, you'll need to tell me."

Lan Zhan heard a slight scuff, a shoe against pavement, back in the direction they'd come in the shaded tunnel of wisteria. He started in that direction, but Wei Ying waved him back.

“Wait a moment, Lan Zhan. She won’t like it if you go.” Wei Ying squeezed his shoulder and reminded him. “I’ve already seen.”

Allowing his husband to leave his sight was not something Lan Zhan was happy to do, but Wei Ying did not go far nor did he entirely leave Lan Zhan’s presence. He leaned around the corner to talk quietly with the person inside. They exchanged only a few words before Lan Zhan heard footsteps hurrying away in sharp contrast to the utter silence of her movements before.

“We have a few weeks to bring replacements.” Wei Ying told him. “We’ll need to spread the word among the sects. The garden is larger now than it was in the beginning. It’ll drain whatever we’ll bring here within a year.”

“You have an idea?” Lan Zhan asked, perusing through his memories of cursed objects and hazardous magical remains for something that would feed the flower mansion in the Yin Iron’s absence.

“I do.” His husband agreed demurely, but didn’t expand on the statement. “The Yin Iron is in the main hall.”

The ‘main hall’ was in fact the remnants of one. The roof had long since caved in and been cleared away. The flowers were more chaotic this deep into the mansion and more alien. The air warmed and took on the humid feel of a heat wave. Lan Zhan identified plants in the riotous masses of color surrounding them that had no business growing in Tanzhou, but were thriving in the microclimate created by the Yin Iron. There were even more plants there he *didn’t* recognize and might grow nowhere else on the continent.

There was a narrow footpath that led them to a dense rosebush that formed the heart of the flower mansion’s most wild garden. The flowers were bluish white and striated with deep red that looked almost like blood. Something rustled deep inside of it and when Wei Ying whistled another fragment of Yin Iron leapt obediently out of the rosebush.

Lan Zhan held out a spirit sealing pouch for Wei Ying to lower it into. He pulled it shut and tucked it into his sleeve.

They both bowed in gratitude and the doors leading out of the main hall opened behind them. However, it seemed they would not be allowed to leave so easily.

“Oh, really?” Wei Ying looked around when the front gate refused to open for him. “You hate it when I recite!” He complained to the seemingly empty garden. The flower maiden’s response was to douse him in petals again. A slightly kinder caress of air, redolent of flowers Lan Zhan had no name for, brushed against his face and he understood.

“You have recited for her,” he said. “I have not.”

“Ah!” Wei Ying smiled. “That’s right. Recite for us then.”

Lan Zhan tucked his hands into his sleeves and ignored the heat in his ears. “*In this house on this day last year...*” he began. “*...a pink face vied in beauty with the pink peach blossoms,*

*side by side. I do not know today where the pink face has gone; in the vernal breeze still smile pink peach blossoms, full-blown."*

No blast of colorful petals met his recital nor was he thrown out of the mansion. Wei Ying smiled softly as he clapped and the lock on the front gate clicked open. As Lan Zhan moved to leave a hand crossed into his field of vision to tuck a flower into his lapel. He meant to turn to try and catch a glimpse of that mysterious face that she'd only shown to Wei Ying, but he was distracted by the hand.

The flower maiden's fingers were too long to be human with too many joints. Her skin had a faint opalescent sheen where the sun dappled across the back of her hand.

"Thank you." He accepted the flower and bowed into the silence.

Wei Ying waited until they were almost back to town to explain, "She looks almost human," he said. "She might have been one at some point. It's why she's so shy. She can maintain the act right up until you see her face. I felt so bad about tricking her once I realized."

So much of a cultivator's business was ugly and violent. Lan Zhan was pleased to know that there were beautiful, useful things in the magical world as well. He wanted to preserve this one. "Where are the angry swords?"

Wei Ying winced. "Underneath the Tulu Xuanwu," he admitted and Lan Zhan suppressed a wince of his own. His focus in the cave had been the monster inside it and then Wei Ying, but with that reminder he found he did remember the many abandoned weapons inside it. They'd all been soaking in the toxic energies of the Tulu Xuanwu for centuries. Yes, a few of those would certainly do. "Fortunately, it's our next stop."

Lan Zhan drew up short. "Why?"

Why would they *ever* want to go back there if they didn't have to? Surely there were other sources of resentful energy they could get to more easily. Yiling alone was cursed right down to the bedrock.

Wei Ying gave him a wan smile. "Because that's where I got the material for the Stygian Tiger Amulet," he said. "Do you remember that sword I pulled out of the Tulu Xuanwu?"

The origins of the Stygian Tiger Amulet, in addition to its mere existence, had been one of the major points of contention that doomed Wei Ying's reputation in their bygone pasts.

Most everyone agreed that he'd stolen the missing fragment of Yin Iron from Xue Yang because he was the one to search the man in Chang manor. That, when coupled with his changed behavior and the sects' general discomfort with his new cultivation method, had turned public sentiment against him. The lure of the Stygian Tiger Amulet made it so that he could never recover it again afterwards.

Lan Zhan hadn't wanted to believe it and couldn't quite make that theory fit with his memories of the night in question, but he couldn't offer any other explanation either. Wei

Ying had been deeply changed by then and refused to answer questions seemingly on general principle so no explanation had been forthcoming from him either.

"I do." He searched Wei Ying's beloved face, not sure what he was looking for.

Wei Ying leaned into him. "Did you believe them?" he asked.

Lan Zhan shook his head. "I could not argue either," he admitted. In those days it had seemed to him that no one's behavior was purely right or wrong. Wei Ying had stolen and lied about it, but at the same time he was not the one using captives for amusing target practice or allowing it to go unchallenged and then daring to speak of righteousness.

He understood now that integrity should not be easy, but at sixteen he'd felt like he was forever groping around in the dark. Only now did the light start to creep in.

Wei Ying laced their fingers together and squeezed. It felt like an apology. It felt like forgiveness.

Lan Zhan squeezed back.

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They stopped at an inn in Tanzhou. It was late and Lan Zhan was wary of travelling after dark.

Inns represented their own brand of danger, but being ambushed in the night while camping in the open was a bigger risk. They knew from experience that Wen Chao had no shame about using someone else as a hunting dog. That they'd found the second Yin Iron fragment did not mean that he intended to let them keep it.

Wei Ying was all for camping because he had a pathology about spending money except on frivolous things and a fountain of ideas for magical security measures besides, but he weakened when Lan Zhan presented him the possibility of a hot bath and food that hadn't been cooked over a campfire. His body might not remember the Burial Mounds, but his mind did and Lan Zhan would take shameless advantage for as long as he had to.

It was worth it later to see Wei Ying flushed pink from the bath, wrapped in a spare robe while their travelling clothes were brushed down, and full of a fine meal.

"Let me comb your hair," he offered and Lan Zhan did not need convincing. Marriage was the constant discovery of a thousand tiny intimacies that two people could share and Lan Zhan wanted each new one even more than the last.

"You recite well," Wei Ying murmured, once they were situated. He was sitting on their bed for the night with Lan Zhan seated on the ground in front of him.

"Mn." Lan Zhan hoped he would not be asked to do so again soon. The feel of Wei Ying's hands and the comb in his hair made his thoughts scatter pleasantly. Even so, he had not forgotten his momentary flush of jealousy in the garden at the idea that his husband had



spoken poetry to someone else and never for him. The flower maiden had probably never heard Wei Ying play, but Lan Zhan's emotions were unwilling to listen to that bit of reason.

Even so, he was in an odd mood. He *wanted* and for once he felt like he could demand. "Recite for me."

Wei Ying's hands paused in his hair. "Lan Zhan, you heard that I'm bad at it."

"On purpose." Lan Zhan opened his eyes to look up and backwards at his husband. "Do it properly."

Wei Ying's mouth quirked in a smile. "You always see right through me," he complained and thought about it as he went back to work carefully unsnarling every tiny tangle he could find in Lan Zhan's long hair. It seemed as though he might not for a moment before Wei Ying leaned down to speak softly into Lan Zhan's ear. *"Among earthly mortals, I ask: what is love that engages couples through life and death?"*

A shiver traced its way down Lan Zhan's spine.

*"This flying pair, travelling from south to north..."* there Wei Ying traced a light line down the length of Lan Zhan's arm with the back of the fingertips on his free hand. *"...had old wings, which survived several summers and winters."*

He knew the poem. Lan Zhan had visited it many times in his first youth, but he'd never been able to bear reading it again after Wei Ying fell. Hearing it from his husband's lips was...

*"Staying paired is happy, but to sever, bitter; a trap in itself where devoted lovers long to still be trapped."* He set the comb aside and brushed the hair away from Lan Zhan's nape. *"He must have had a thought; for whom shall I trail a forlorn shadow flying over ten thousand miles of grey clouds and mountains of night snow?"* Wei Ying pressed a kiss against the back of his neck and Lan Zhan's hands closed into fists. *"On this road by Fen river... ah! Lan Zhan!"*

He laughed as Lan Zhan twisted in his grasp and lifted him bodily back onto the bed. There they forgot all about poetry for a little while.

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It was easier to move in these days than Lan Zhan remembered it being. There continued to be no sign of the dire owl or Wen Chao.

They spotted a few QishanWen patrols the closer they got to Dusk Creek Mountain, but they were smaller and easier to avoid. More often than not they appeared to be on their way somewhere else and at speed.

Lan Zhan saw no groups large enough to threaten any of the great sects, but that did not mean that the smaller forces they saw wouldn't join up later. He was painfully aware that they had very little time before Wen Xu would march on Cloud Recesses.

Even so, Dusk Creek Mountain didn't seem to be of any particular interest to the Wen soldiers. Killing the great beast had only been Wen Chao's vainglorious obsession after all. Everyone else in Qishan seemed perfectly content to leave it alone.

Finding the entrance to the Tulu Xuanwu's cave took the intervention of Xiaodan and the two spirit pouches. Lan Zhan had forgotten that it was concealed.

"I think we can make camp up here without being noticed," Wei Ying announced, twirling Xiaodan in his fingers.

"I would prefer to have our supplies with us if we're trapped inside." Lan Zhan had no intentions of starving to death in there. This time there would be no one to come looking for them if they got trapped.

Wei Ying grinned. "Actually, I thought *we'd* stay outside too." He had a look on his face that Lan Zhan recognized as an invitation.

He cocked an inquisitive eyebrow at his husband, which seemed to suffice.

"Do you remember that time Shufu threw a scroll at me?" Wei Ying asked.

Lan Zhan did, in detail.

"The thought exercise regarding the executioner," he realized and considered the cave; all those weapons, all those bodies, all that resentment. Utilizing the bodies of an executioner's victims seemed like trading one problem for a worse one. That was the hidden complication of Wei Ying's proposed solution. Dozens of resentful spirits were a larger problem than one angry ghost.

A seemingly immortal opponent like the Tulu Xuanwu made for a *very* different variable. Ghosts they could exorcise. Weapons could now be purified in Flower Mansion. The Tulu Xuanwu had consumed entire *cities* during its last rampage and not for lack of powerful cultivators doing their damndest to kill it.

Lan Zhan suspected the only reason they'd managed to do so in their previous life was because reptiles were sluggish and weak after long periods of torpor. The cavern it lived in was unseasonably cold, adding to its reluctance to get into a drawn out conflict for what was probably a very small meal by its standards. When they retreated out of sight, it did not follow for long. That gave them time to regroup and plan. In short, they'd been *very* lucky.

This was not the sort of moral debate his uncle would appreciate and so Lan Zhan resolved to never tell him about it.

"I will play Cleansing for you afterwards," Lan Zhan decided aloud and reached for his qiankun bag. This would be a long battle, even with two shards of Yin Iron to draw on. There was a chance Wei Ying would faint again and if that happened then he wanted a tent ready for the recovery period.

Unlike Tanzhou, which had the Flower Mansion to act as a sink for negative energies, Qishan was rife with resentful energy for Wei Ying to draw on. Even so, it took twelve hours of nearly constant playing as Wei Ying called up first the bodies and ghosts of the Tulu Xuanwu's victims followed by every angry dead thing within reach of his music.

In Qishan, after decades of Wen Ruohan's semi-apathetic rule, that was a *lot* and Wei Ying marched them *all* into the mountain. Fortunately, the region was not particularly well populated and, if the worn condition of some of the bodies he saw marching themselves into the cave was any indicator, already plagued by wandering corpses. If anyone *did* see Wei Ying's soldiers then they likely did not mark it except to stay away.

Lan Zhan could hear the sounds of battle underneath the mountain and could feel the tremors of the Tulu Xuanwu's thrashing. He imagined it was something like a snake being swarmed by ants.

Wei Ying was able to pause here and there to attend to his physical needs, but soon had to return to it as their enemy tore through his forces.

Eventually the sounds emerging from the cave mouth quieted and they risked taking a look inside. The Tulu Xuanwu's head had been submerged in the water and its tattered body lay half out of its shell. The remaining ghosts and monsters milled around aimlessly inside. There were rather fewer of them than Wei Ying had sent in and Lan Zhan suspected that some of them had spent all the fury and recrimination binding their souls to the world of the living in the battle and had dispersed. It was a minority of the original forces however, so Wei Ying's concept of letting an angry ghost vent its fury still needed some work.

"Time for clean up," Wei Ying murmured as they pulled back outside.

A group of wandering corpses pulled first the Yin Iron sword out of the cave and then a pile of weapons that emanated such an aura of un-dispelled resentment that Lan Zhan could practically smell it on the air like copper. There was plenty of food for the flower maiden's garden until someone, probably Xichen as this was *exactly* the sort of project he loved best, could arrange for regular deliveries of whatever the sects could find that needed cleansing.

Lan Zhan expected that they would seal the cave themselves, but Wei Ying brought out his flute one final time to play something that was and was not Rest. Rest was a peaceful song meant to ease ghosts without much attachment to the material world on towards the next. A spirit could resist it if they were strong enough, if its attachment was tight enough.

What Wei Ying played was a command, not an offer or a lullabye. The assembled spirits crumbled before it and were *gone*.

Wei Ying slumped afterwards into Lan Zhan's arms. Going by the twinkle in his eyes, it was only *partly* so he could have the pleasure of making his husband catch him.

They ate cold trail rations and Lan Zhan played Cleansing well into the night.

"We have three pieces now," Wei Ying commented as they lay in their shared bedroll that night, tucked in tightly together. "Wen Ruohan has one. Do you suppose the sword was the

one Xue Yang was hiding?" He didn't sound like he believed it.

Lan Zhan frowned. "I do not know how he would have retrieved it. Chang manor is far from here and he was not strong compared to the Tulu Xuanwu." He thought on it. "The sword does not look like the other pieces either and the Tulu Xuanwu is said to have last been seen four hundred years ago despite the stories saying that Xue Chonghai commanded the beast."

"So there's a chance that the sword was sealed in that cave before Xue Chonghai even refined the Yin Iron ingot," Wei Ying mused. He sounded no more enthusiastic about the possibility than Lan Zhan felt. Yes, it answered lingering questions about Wei Ying's fate in their previous lives, but that also meant there was another piece of Yin Iron in play that they couldn't easily locate.

Something wasn't adding up, but they'd been gone for as long as he dared to stay away from Cloud Recesses.

It was time to return and present their findings to Xichen.

---

Their route home took them back through Tanzhou where Wei Ying planted the swords he'd gleaned out of the Tulu Xuanwu's cave into various spots through the gardens, directed by the flick of barely-seen sleeves and a voice Lan Zhan never could quite catch.

The closer they got to Cloud Recesses, the harder it became for Lan Zhan to draw a whole breath. They'd seen nothing of Wen Xu or Wen Chao. Things were going *too* well. Their return was *too* easy.

He was growing to despise the axe hanging over both their heads. The waiting and anxiety was unbearable.

Even so, no one attacked them on the road. When they transitioned to travelling by boat, there was no evidence of QishanWen troop movements along the river; no signal fires, no owl, no ambushes.

Wei Ying's nerves weren't much better. Both their tempers were short from being on constant alert by the time they docked in Caiyi and the knot in Lan Zhan's stomach didn't unravel until Xichen met them at the gate of Cloud Recesses with a genuine smile of relief.

"What have you done to the wards?" Wei Ying asked, squinting at the gate. Lan Zhan could detect no difference, but was willing to accept his husband's feelings on the matter as evidence.

Xichen blinked in surprise. "You can tell they've changed?"

Wei Ying nodded.

"There was a minor incident." He touched one of the jade tokens at his waist. "We'll discuss it further inside, but you'll need new passes before you can leave again. Come."

Xichen took them straight to the Hanshi, activated the building's privacy ward, and served them both cups of strong back tea before he finally sat down himself. "Were you successful?" He fretted.

"We found two additional pieces, but there may be a third in play." Wei Ying poked Lan Zhan in the side.

Xichen frowned as they revealed the Yin Iron sword and the fragment they'd found in Flower Mansion. "One of these things is certainly not like the others," he agreed and then frowned harder as Wei Ying leaned away from the sword. It was not lost on Lan Zhan that he had so far declined to touch it even at all. He'd had the corpses wrap it up in one of their spare blankets and put it directly into the spirit pouch Lan Zhan had just tipped it out of. "Is something wrong?"

"It's just loud." Wei Ying made a face.

"Then we will seal it." Xichen used tongs to re-wrap the sword. They placed it back in its pouch and put it away with the other fragments in a larger warded chest that Xichen had commissioned while they were gone.

"Now," he said, once it was gone and the pained lines had disappeared from Wei Ying's brow. "Tell me everything."

As one might have predicted, Xichen did not like the story of their adventure on Dusk Creek Mountain at all; not even the highly edited version Lan Zhan allowed Wei Ying to deliver. It was not technically untrue. The story Wei Ying told was mostly the same as how they'd killed it the first time.

He did, however, smile upon learning about the true purpose of Flower Mansion.

"It's good that you have supplied the gardens for now," Xichen praised them both. "It might be a while until the sects are able to contribute." His smile faded. "Wen Ruohan issued an edict restricting all sects to their own territories. He's forbidden all night hunting..."

"...except for QishanWen." Wei Ying guessed.

Xichen nodded his agreement. "Yes. It is, frankly, unenforceable. If he weren't Chief Cultivator then no one would be listening to him at all. For the moment the elders have chosen to give the appearance of respect to the office he holds until such a time as he can be removed from it. His position is not unassailable. It would be difficult, but it's looking more and more likely that it will happen as he makes demands like these or sends his sons to hassle us. A-Yao believes this recent demand is an attempt to divert our regional tithe income to Qishan in order to offset the setbacks they've experienced this year. The Wen are wealthy, but Nightless City's overhead expenses are no doubt extreme. They are feeling their losses."

No major sect lived entirely off the yearly tithes offered to them by the towns and villages in their territories. YunmengJiang controlled and patrolled several major river ports. They also received payments from those cities to police the waters against piracy. LanlingJin was deep into overland trade routes. GusuLan controlled three silver mines and those children of the

extended Lan sect who couldn't successfully form a golden core became silversmiths or some other variety of artisan.

In short, the night hunt revenue wouldn't give Qishan Wen much of a cushion and the other sects would resent having any amount of money diverted from their pockets.

"Maintaining a standing army will do that." Wei Ying nodded to Xichen's belt. "What was the incident you mentioned?"

"Ah." Xichen colored. "I'm afraid A-Yao was experimenting with one of the spells you taught him and inadvertently brought down the entire barrier around Cloud Recesses." He sounded fond, despite the major disaster he'd just described. "It was one of the first security spells of its kind, but as we just learned it has some flaws. It was fine for controlling casual access to the mountain and containing wayward students, but given the current political climate it really did need to be replaced. You'll both be issued new tokens, but for the moment I will require you both to stay inside. I'm very pleased to have you both back safely." He looked back and forth between them. "I'll pass your report to Shufu while you two go to rest."

The Jingshi had been shut all while they were gone. As much as Lan Zhan would have preferred to see him lay down for a while - Wei Ying's color had been bad every since Dusk Creek Mountain and was only just starting to return to normal now that they'd divested themselves of that terrible sword - Lan Zhan's husband went around opening the doors to air it out. He caught Wei Ying as his husband started to look for dust cloths.

"It is time for sleep."

Wei Ying looked like he might fight him about that for a half-second, but instead he let Lan Zhan catch his weight as he leaned over and put his arms around his husband's waist. They stood like that as Wei Ying let whatever he was feeling roll through his body with his cheek laid on Lan Zhan's shoulder.

"So how much of an accident do you think it was that Meng Yao uncovered a flaw in the barrier in a way the elders couldn't ignore *right* as tensions with the Wen sect have started to heat up?" He asked after a while, in a transparent attempt at diversion that Lan Zhan allowed to happen since forcing a confrontation was not what he wanted and directly opposed his goal of getting Wei Ying to lay down for a nap.

"As you say." Lan Zhan agreed. "The elders were not in a position to disagree."

That rarely *stopped* them, but this time would have been different. Wen Ruohan was making Xichen and their uncle very nervous and that anxiety was contagious. It was possible that Meng Yao saw an opportunity to cut through the habitual intrasect bickering to shore up the defenses of Cloud Recesses and he took it.

What he wasn't sure of was the degree to which Xichen would have been involved. Lan Zhan knew from supervising Wei Ying and Meng Yao that they were both far too clever. Meng Yao hid his intelligence behind a demure mask, but it slipped sometimes when he was chasing an

idea. Xichen had been mentoring him ever since Wei Ying was released from his punishment so there was no way he *hadn't* noticed.

His older brother wasn't blind and he was certainly unorthodox enough to accept any gift opportunities Meng Yao arranged for him. It was just a question of how much of himself Meng Yao was willing to share with Xichen.

It was also not lost on Lan Zhan that Meng Yao had not returned to Qinghe with the rest of the Nie students. Given the way Xichen referred to him as 'A-Yao' and casually discussed sect business with him, it now seemed likely that he never would.

He was starting to see the hand of their mysterious benefactor in this. Xichen and Jin Guangyao had been clearly besotted with each other in Lan Zhan's first life, but were divided first by their sect loyalties and then later by Jin Guangyao's need for a politically useful marriage to shore up his position at Jinlintai. He and Qin Su were happy together and very loving, but Lan Zhan had noticed that Jin Guangyao never lost his preference for Xichen's company.

Their strengths, however, *did* naturally complement each other. Xichen had weaknesses that eventually bore unpleasant fruit. He didn't like conflict. He tended to believe the best in others even when healthy skepticism would have served his office better. A permanent alliance with Meng Yao could compensate for those soft spots without compromising Xichen as a person.

Jin sect had certainly not been the secure harbor that Lan Zhan felt Meng Yao had been looking for. In the same ways that Wei Ying could be considered a bad fit for Cloud Recesses, Meng Yao was actually quite a good one when the guest disciples weren't around to hector him. Arranging for him to be transplanted into Cloud Recesses wasn't a bad deal for Meng Yao in the long run. He had a natural paranoia that had turned out to serve as an excellent foil to Xichen's occasionally naive optimism.

Was their benefactor part of Nie sect? Maybe, but even Lan Zhan knew that Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang would be fairly easy for a sufficiently crafty person to steer even if they were an outsider. He couldn't jump to conclusions. It could just as easily be Meng Yao himself, although Lan Zhan doubted it. For all his artful ways, he too often wore his heart on his face and if you watched him carefully and timed it right then it became obvious that he had no idea how he'd come to this juncture in his life and was, perhaps, afraid of endangering it.

"I wonder what Shufu will think about *two* nephews-in-law?" Wei Ying mused, switching positions so that his pointy chin replaced his cheek.

Lan Zhan leaned their cheeks together and thought of the way he'd once caught Meng Yao watching Xichen's back like a small boy who'd caught a butterfly in his hands and was frantically having to figure out the delicacy necessary to handle it. Xichen wasn't a butterfly and could tolerate some rough handling, but it spoke well of Meng Yao that he clearly did not agree. "That will depend on how well Meng Yao takes to the guqin."

Miracle of miracles, Wei Ying agreed to nap for the rest of the afternoon --just so long as Lan Zhan was willing to be his mattress. Lan Zhan had no personal objections to it.

The possibility of them gaining a brother-in-law increased when Meng Yao appeared at the family dinner; displaying exquisite manners and no Nie braids in his hair. He served tea to Lan Qiren and played a passable duet with Xichen after the meal. His easy acceptance of Lan Qiren's artistic critique afterwards probably earned him more favor than the performance itself.

Wei Ying and Meng Yao took themselves off to walk in the garden as Lan Zhan reluctantly stayed behind to play for his uncle and brother. One of the disciplines that was relaxed for guests and spouses married in for was the restriction against gossip, since observing that one involved too many unspoken delineations between what was rumor mongering and what was sharing necessary news for it to be manageable if you hadn't been raised to it.

He waited until they were back in private to turn his expectant gaze on Wei Ying.

"Let me take this out and I'll share what A-Yao told me," Wei Ying said, pointing to his guan. It was heavier than the one he'd been strongarmed into wearing for their travels. The main body of it had abstract wing shapes set with jet and snowflake obsidian and was speared through with a crooked zhan made to look like a tree branch.

Xichen had dug deep into the family vault to find anything that would marry well with Wei Ying's preference for black, but would also hang an unmistakable sign of Lan ownership around his neck in the event that anyone questioned his marriage.

Lan Zhan obediently went to help his husband let down his hair.

"Qishan *may* have put down a peasant revolt earlier this month. Some farmers refused to pay tithe to the QishanWen because they weren't receiving adequate protection and then tried to drive the Wen sect out of a supervisory office they'd set up in the headman's house there. No one knows exactly who or where though. Meng Yao also heard about potential bandit activity all over Qishan. He says it's probably all hungry farmers now that the grain stores from last year are running low." Wei Ying reported.

That would explain why they'd slipped through Qishan and the surrounding areas largely unnoticed. They'd deliberately avoided major travel routes and urban areas once they were out of Tanzhou. Even the rumors were enough to force Wen Ruohan into pulling his forces back into his own territory. He'd have to re-establish order quickly, but Lan Zhan suspected it was too late for that.

There would be more revolts. Tithes weren't tithes if you had no choice but to pay them. After that they were taxes and taxation fundamentally changed the relationship between a sect and the people in their territory.

No sect *owned* the land they claimed as their territory. It all belonged to the Emperor who, as a general rule, ignored the sects so long as they didn't infringe on his authority or his income too much. The tithes were acceptable because he didn't want to have to arrange a bureau of exorcists if he didn't have to. The expense would be ruinous. Not even the sects lived off the protection money their client communities paid them.



Some individual cultivation clans were asked by the common folk to provide a minor policing presence in very specific circumstances, but *only* in a capacity that was not already being filled by Imperial authority. They were like mercenaries, just slightly more trustworthy. It wasn't the same thing as policing the *entire region*.

That said, they were all a long way from the Capitol. If Wen Ruohan ever succeeded in subjugating cultivation society then *that* might eventually draw Imperial notice, but it would take decades.

"I suppose we know where Wen Chao and Wen Xu were all this time now," Wei Ying continued. "They're his primary enforcers. He'd need them in Qishan." He leaned back to catch Lan Zhan's eye. "People are saying that Wen Ruohan is trying to set himself up as a little emperor and the heavens aren't happy about it."

In point of fact, he *was*. Wei Ying had even once phrased it in exactly those terms during a fight with Jin Zixun when he accused the Jin sect of trying to fill that power void.

He wondered if their benefactor had been present for that conversation. If so, they'd certainly taken the idea to heart.

Probably. Nearly every major and minor player in cultivation society had been at that banquet and Wei Ying had deliberately made a scene in front of all of them.

Natural disasters. Famine. Civic unrest. These were all things that could and *had* ended real dynasties.

Of the current events, he had only heard concrete reports of the landslides and blighted crops. Those two things could be caused by sabotage. Everything else -the volcano, the revolt, the banditry- were all rumors.

They were however *strategic* rumors that Wen Ruohan could not afford to ignore because, once people started talking about those kinds of things, they tended to become reality.

Wen Ruohan had likely been forced to make it even worse by flooding his territory with soldiers in Wen colors. Rumors might not sway *everyone* into believing that Wen Ruohan was setting himself up as the overlord of Qishan and perhaps more, but it was hard to explain away an occupying army.

The look in Wei Ying's eyes said he was thinking along the same lines. "I wonder if we'll hear about a plague in Qishan next," he wondered out loud.

"It would be the logical next step," Lan Zhan reflected.

He made a note to ask Xichen for more detail about the new wards around Cloud Recesses. Wen Ruohan was being systematically backed into a corner, whether he knew it or not, but there'd be more violence before his hidden enemy could close in for the kill.

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They were woken late that night by distant shouts. Both Lan Zhan and Wei Ying, hardened by old instincts, were out of bed and armed before they quite knew what they were doing.

Wei Ying, who was often better at night, realized it first. “Lan Zhan, it’s coming from the Hanshi!”

Xichen was whole and unhurt when they arrived, but in his night clothes with a pale-faced and sweating Meng Yao contained firmly within the protective circle of his arms as Xichen passed him energy and helped him keep pressure on a wound in his side. He too was dressed for bed despite being nowhere near the guest houses. His shirt was red with blood and the bulk of it seemed to be his own.

Meng Yao’s color was good and the two guards standing by didn’t seem to be panicking so it wasn’t a mortal injury, just a messy one. He just needed to be still and careful until someone could close it for him. Fortunately, Xichen seemed up to the task.

On the floor, underneath a sheet, lay a body. Next to the body was Meng Yao’s discarded sword, Hensheng, and it was smeared with enough blood on the blade and handle to be the murder weapon.

Wei Ying knelt by the body and flipped up the sheet covering it to reveal a familiar face; Xue Yang. He was still smiling even in death.

Conveniently for them he was also dressed in Wen red and black, leaving little question about who he was working for --or, given what Lan Zhan knew about Xue Yang, who *thought* he was working for them.

“It looks like we were being watched after all,” he sighed and dropped the sheet. “I thought we were getting off lightly.”

“Wei... ah, Lan...?” An outer disciple Lan Zhan was not personally familiar with, but who must have been on guard duty that night stammered over Wei Ying’s title. They had *not* in fact decided whether Wei Ying would keep his family name or take on Lan Zhan’s since he was *technically* now an inner disciple of Lan Sect. They’d been too busy figuring everything else out in addition to the Yin Iron.

“Wei-gongzi,” Wei Ying corrected him absently then frowned as he got distracted by a question none of them had thought to ask. “Lan-san-gongzi? Lan-er-fujin? Furen?”

“We’ll discuss it in Lotus Pier next month,” Xichen promised, sounding pinched. “Wuxian, would you mind...?” He nodded towards the warded chest.

Wei Ying nodded and lifted Xiaodan to his lips. The contents of the warded chest rattled. Xue Yang had not managed to penetrate the protections on it.

So too did something underneath the sheet hidden amongst Xue Yang’s clothing and underneath his body.

“*Ho?*” Wei Ying murmured in interest.

Lan Zhan kicked the body over without hesitation. A pouch rose up from where it had been tucked into Xue Yang's back belt and floated over to present itself to Wei Ying. To the surprise of everyone except Lan Zhan and Wei Ying, a shard of Yin Iron tumbled into his palm.

*This* time Xue Yang had kept his shard on him.

Wei Ying showed it to Lan Zhan. "He must have been using it to dowse his way to the other pieces just like we were."

"That cannot be Wen Ruohan's fragment." Meng Yao winced when he momentarily forgot he'd been stabbed and leaned forward to look. "He'd be *insane* to let it out of his hands!"

"A-Yao, please, stay still. The wound isn't closed yet." Xichen tugged him closer over Meng Yao's 'but!'

"Has anyone woken up any of the doctors?" Lan Zhan asked the other guard who had been quiet so far.

"Yes, Lan-er-gongzi. Shufu went to fetch someone." She reported.

If Lan Qiren had gone *himself* after Meng Yao had spilled blood within Cloud Recesses with a concealed weapon after having slept with their acting sect leader outside of wedlock then Meng Yao had *definitely* emerged as his uncle's favorite.

"What happened?" Wei Ying asked.

"I heard *-ah-* someone in the outer room." Meng Yao answered, breaking on a hiss as Xichen adjusted his grip to keep applying pressure to his wound. "I snuck out to see and got caught."

"*You* got caught." Wei Ying's disbelief was polite at least. "Don't you catch birds with Nie-xiong? With your bare hands?"

Meng Yao sighed. "Please don't rub my nose in it, Wei-gongzi. I stepped on a creaking panel I hadn't noticed before and woke Zewu-jun. The intruder attacked me, but he was distracted when Zewu-jun came to my defense. I thought..." He swallowed and glanced at Hensheng. "...if I was going to die then I wasn't about die alone."

"A-Yao." Zewu-jun brushed a lock of Meng Yao's hair back from his face. Meng Yao received the gesture like he'd been slapped and could decide whether he'd liked it or not. "In the future, please refrain from such gestures. I would prefer to have you with your blood still on the inside."

Lan Qiren arrived then with two grim-faced doctors who converged on Meng Yao. Lan Zhan's uncle lifted Hensheng from the ground and frowned at the flexible blade.

"It was a gift from Nie-zongzhu." Xichen took the wind right out of their uncle's billowing sails as he was shunted away from his lover's side.

Lan Qiren frowned harder, but didn't comment. It was an explosive problem, but his nephew had just given him a gift-wrapped excuse to not have to fight about it. Concealed weapons were one thing. Disrespect shown towards a gift granted to a private guest by a friendly sect leader was quite another. "I gave him permission to carry it within Cloud Recesses, given the current circumstances."

Lan Zhan considered the idea of someone like Meng Yao going visibly armed in the Unclean Realms. The soldiers there often had a narrow definition of masculinity. Neither he nor Xichen fit that mold and had put up with several 'friendly' challenges each from Nie cultivators before it became clear they were both acceptably skilled duellists. Meng Yao was not and had needed to be armed in such a way that would not draw similar fire.

"Shufu, let me," Wei Ying offered. "I know how to care for one of those."

"Hm." Lan Qiren reluctantly handed the weapon over. "Do we have any ideas about the identity of our guest?"

"Going by the smile and his missing pinky finger..." Wei Ying flicked his wrist so that the blade went straight. Then he drew a kerchief out of his sleeve and started to clean Hensheng. He nodded at Xue Yang's hand, which had fallen to one side of his body palm-up so that the attachment points for his prosthetic finger were clearly visible, "...he's a thug from Kuizhou named Xue Yang. I hadn't heard anything about him joining QishanWen, but if Wen Ruohan needed a shadow operative without much in the way of morals then he could have done worse. Someone should do a headcount and make sure no one's missing. Even if he *could* have gotten in without killing someone, I don't think he would have."

Lan Qiren made a grim noise. "Wangji, Wuxian. Take the warded chest and the new fragment with you to the Jingshi. Set up whatever protections you can. I will send guards to keep watch. You two." He glared at the present guard. "Go help. I will remain here. I need to have a word with my nephew."

Lan Zhan took one look at Xichen's pained grimace, silently wished him luck with copying all of Virtue and probably the entirety of Conduct twice, collected the chest, caught his husband by the collar, and left for his own house --not that either of them got any further sleep.

Wei Ying stayed up late warding the Jingshi down to the smallest cracks in the floorboards. The sun was rising and the gong announcing mao hour sounded shortly after he finished. Breakfast and a message from Xichen arrived with the changing guards.

Meng Yao was resting in the medical pavilion and was expected to make a full recovery. Xue Yang had been positively identified by a group of junior disciples and their supervisor who'd visited Kuizhou. The elders had conducted a head count and someone was indeed missing. They found the body of the patroller Xue Yang had targeted for his pass rolled into a trench a short distance outside of the main gate. All of Cloud Recesses was now on edge.

QishanWen had escalated from throwing their weight around to hidden violence and Lan Zhan didn't believe this was as bad as things would get.

“What do you think their next move will be?” Wei Ying asked quietly after he’d finished reading the letter. “By this point QishanWen had demanded hostages for their indoctrination camp, but they don’t have the clout to pull that off this time.”

“Will that stop them?” Lan Zhan asked. It had been a stupid idea the first time too, but the indoctrination camp still stood out in his mind as a milestone. Afterwards, the Wen had singled out YunmengJiang as an example to the other sects so Wen Qing’s warning was on his mind.

If Lotus Pier fell a second time then he’d lose Wei Ying the same way he’d lost his zhiji the first time.

They’d seen no sign of Wen Zhuliu during their travels nor even heard a single word about him. He’d been instrumental in bringing down Lotus Pier, Lan Zhan knew that. Wen Chao led the attack, but Wen Zhuliu was both the subcommander and the backbone of Wen Chao’s attacking forces. Everyone knew he’d been the one to murder both Yu-furen and Jiang-zongzhu even though his master took credit for both kills.

“No.” Wei Ying scowled, but relented after a moment. “It’d almost be worth it to see the look on Wen Chao’s face when he realizes that the Tulu Xuanwu is already dead, though.”

It would be, assuming Wei Ying managed not to give into the urge to kill him before that.

Even if he didn’t then Lan Zhan just might.

## Chapter End Notes

Observations from the chapter, more or less in order:

LWJ, noticing some Significant Resemblances between himself in his latter days and his father currently: So I'm electing to ignore that...

Did LXC get tipped off by MY about where all the cutsleeve erotica in Cloud Recesses was coming from and that NHS is notorious for holding back the good stuff? Maybe. Good luck proving it. I, however, DO gift you with the mental image of LXC just walking straight into NHS's room with an impenetrable smile, going right for the floor board where the books are hidden, and then sailing right back out with an armful of porn all over NHS's increasingly alarmed exclamations of "Er-ge? Er-ge?!"

Is it a coincidence that the Benefactor chose a period of time in which LWJ and WWX's movements are very tightly controlled by the somewhat more predictable adults in their lives? Maybe!

LWJ' exorcism song is called 'Rest'. WWX's is called 'Go the Fuck To Sleep.'

Did you ask for my headcanon breakdown of sect economics? No. Am I going to give you one anyway? Absolutely.

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Things my roommate said while betaing this fic:

Roommate, as the Civic Unrest pops up: if Wen Ruohan were an emperor, I'd say he'd lost the Mandate of Heaven

Me: About that...

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Poetry from this chapter:

This is the poem LWJ recites for the Flower Maiden. (FYI I am not trying to make the poetry period accurate, just relevant to the topic since MXTX has outright stated this doesn't have a particular historic setting.)

Written in a Village South of the Capital

- by Cui Hu (772 - 846)

In this house on this day last year, a pink face vied

In beauty with the pink peach blossoms side by side.

I do not know today where the pink face has gone;

In the vernal breeze still smile pink peach blossoms full-blown.

Here is the entire poem that WWX recites for LWJ. I stopped it where I did because it gets a little too on the nose after a certain point:

Yanqiu

-by Yuan Haowen (1190–1257)

Among the earthly mortals, I ask: what is Love  
That engages couples through life and death?  
This flying pair, traveling from south to north,  
Had old wings, which survived several summers and winters.  
Staying paired is happy,  
But to sever, bitter: a trap in itself where devoted lovers  
Still long to be trapped. He must have had a thought:  
For whom shall I trail a forlorn shadow flying over  
Ten thousand miles of gray clouds  
And mountains of night snow?  
On this road by Fen River, the old pipes, and drums  
Are gone. Only bleak smoke and vast woods are left.

Vain to evoke the ancient ghosts. The Mountain Spirit  
Also, wails in vain. Heaven envies the geese,  
Not believing they'll return to dust like orioles  
And swallows. There they'll remain, for a thousand  
Autumns, awaiting the poets of later generations  
Who is coming, rhapsodizing and quaffing  
Just for a view of the wild geese's tomb.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Meng Yao was released from the medical pavilion on the second day after Xue Yang broke into Cloud Recesses. He celebrated by visiting the Jingshi with a map case and courier envelope from QingheNie.

“Does Zewu-jun know you planned to walk over here?” Wei Ying often vocalized the things Lan Zhan was only thinking about and this occasion was no exception.

Xichen had in fact been made to copy Virtue, Fortitude, *and* all of Conduct in penance for his premarital relationship. Meng Yao had been excused from punishment considering his wound, status as a guest, and the fact that he really *was* in the lead for the position of Lan Qiren’s favorite.

Lan Zhan wasn’t sure why that bothered him on Wei Ying’s behalf when Wei Ying hadn’t even realized it was a competition, but it did.

“Zewu-jun is a very busy person,” Meng Yao replied with one of his slightly too deep bows and a glassy mirror of a smile.

“That’s a no,” Wei Ying informed Lan Zhan who nodded in agreement and went to fetch their guest something to sit on before he tore his stitches. “Come here and letgege have a look at you.”

“I will if, in exchange, you never refer to yourself that way in my hearing ever again,” Meng Yao replied, but let Wei Ying prod at his side and then pass him a little spiritual energy to boost his flagging reserves. He’d made great progress in his cultivation since attending the lectures, but he still lacked the reserves and stamina of other cultivators his age and it showed in times like these.

“I try not to make promises I can’t keep,” Wei Ying replied vaguely. “What did you bring?”

“I received word from Qinghe this morning. I shared it with Zewu-jun. He’s discussing it with Shufu, but he gave me permission to share the news with you two.” Meng Yao set down his burden and tucked his hands primly into his sleeves. “We have known for some time that one of Wen Ruohan’s sons went missing. He was meant to escort Wen-guniang back to Nightless City after the lecture series, but he never arrived to pick her up. Wen-guniang departed Gusu on her own. For a while it was both my and Zewu-jun’s thought that they’d arranged to meet elsewhere, but two QingheNie scouts recently found an abandoned camp off the main route between Qishan and Gusu. They must have set up some distance from the road. No one noticed anything until the gathering crows became noticeable. Everyone in the camp, including Wen Chao and his personal retinue, was found dead.”



“An ambush?” Lan Zhan guessed. Wang Lingjiao and her branding iron would be among the dead for certain. Would Wen Zhuliu? If it hadn’t been for his anxiety over the possible assault on Cloud Recesses then he would have been tempted to stay out longer to hunt that man down.

Meng Yao shook his head. “We suspect their wards were sabotaged.”

Wei Ying’s only reaction was a slight pause as he spun Xiaodan idly in his fingers. When the occasion called for it, he was an excellent actor. “Oh? How?”

“Zongzhu isn’t sure. It’s outside his area of expertise, but there was evidence of a ghostly assault and all of the talismans that a group that size would have used around their campsite were removed before the bodies could be discovered.” Meng Yao frowned. “Whoever was responsible seems to have cleaned up all the monsters they attracted as well. The remains of many wandering corpses were found some distance away already disposed of. There were the cold remnants of a fire there with some fragments of the spell talismans.”

Lan Zhan was reminded uncomfortably of the Wen supervisory office where he and Jiang Wanyin had finally caught up to Wei Ying. He’d done something similar to the building protections there; turning ghost repellant talismans into ghost attracting talismans by subverting the spell language.

“What an ugly enemy.” Wei Ying grimaced. “I wish I could narrow down the candidates, but...”

“...he offended people as easily as breathing.” Meng Yao agreed in much the same tone. “It would almost be easier to make a list of people who *didn’t* want him dead, but that is not entirely why I came.” He held up his map case. “Will Wei-gongzi and Lan-er-gongzi be willing to entertain a theory of mine?”

Lan Zhan nodded on both their behalfs.

Meng Yao ducked his gaze and smiled slightly. It was a bit crooked and not so polished as the ones he made when he met someone’s eye. Lan Zhan suspected that’s how to know whether it was genuine or not.

“I suspect that there are *five* pieces of Yin Iron,” he said softly. “Shufu believes that our nocturnal visitor was entrusted with Wen Ruohan’s fragment in order to locate the others, but I don’t believe that a man as obsessed with power as he seems to be would even be capable of that level of trust. Moreover, he already seemed to know there was a fragment in Gusu; hence Wen-guniang’s presence at the lectures. There was no need for him to put his own fragment at risk.”

“So you think he didn’t,” Wei Ying guessed.

“Exactly so.” Meng Yao spread out his map and laid weights on it in the places where the ying iron fragments had been hidden; Cloud Recesses, the Flower Mansion, and Dusk Creek Mountain. “According to what you were told by Lan Yi, the fragments were hidden in the cardinal directions. My question is this; the cardinal directions in relation to *what*? Here we

have east and south; Gusu and Tanzhou. Qishan's fragment, we will assume, was hidden somewhere in the west." He placed a weight in the general vicinity of Wen territory, but then tapped the weight that represented the Tulu Xuanwu's cave. It was located on a midline between Qishan and Gusu, roughly equidistant between the two, but no further north than either. "I would not call *that* north."

"No." Wei Ying crowded close, crouching over the map. "I wouldn't either. Kuizhou is southwest of Dusk Creek Mountain though."

"Men are mobile. There's nothing to say he didn't find it or inherit it from an ancestor who stole it." Meng Yao indicated the northern sects. "There's been opportunity. QingheNie alone has had several succession crises over the past several generations. Yangquan, Hejian, and Laoling have all been ravaged by cholera in the past as well. It's not impossible that the custodians of the northern fragment weren't able to pass their duties down to an heir..." He paused and met Wei Ying's gaze. "... and then there is the matter of our guest's surname."

"Xue. Xue Yang. *Xue Chonghai*." Wei Ying sat back, doing a very good job of pretending this was new information. "It might explain why he was working with Wen Ruohan. He doesn't have a reputation for taking orders well, but it makes sense if they were hoping to use each other to get the rest of the fragments. Have you discussed this with Shufu and Zewu-jun?"

"Ah, no." Meng Yao ducked his head and began to bundle his map case. "I had hoped that *you* might bring it up. I am the servant of another sect and the conflict of interest..."

"An allied sect," Lan Zhan interjected into the silence their guest left hanging. "Qinghe and Gusu are friendly. You're here with Nie-zongzhu's blessing."

"Meng-gongzi." Wei Ying took pity on him. "Do you *really* plan on going back? Do you think Zewu-jun is willing to let you go?"

"Nothing has been decided. Zewu-jun has not communicated any such desires to me." Meng Yao pulled back, lowering his gaze. Nothing about his expression was compliant, however. He didn't want to go back to Qinghe and it was obvious to anyone who looked at him.

"If my sect leader summons me then I must go. Please consider my request." He bowed, turned, and all but fled.

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In the end, neither Lan Zhan nor Wei Ying found out about the Indoctrination Camp until *after* his uncle and brother had rejected the demand.

It came up after the first meal Meng Yao was able to join them for after he'd been released from the medical pavilion. He wasn't taking well to being expected to rest. He kept trying to pour tea or play music for the assembled company and was left visibly at a loss every time Xichen gently bullied him back to his seat; it felt like Xichen was peeling another layer of skin off Meng Yao every small act of kindness.

Lan Zhan empathized, but also did not interfere.

They'd ignored Meng Yao's earlier request and credited him fully when passing along the five fragment theory, but Wei Ying had also confided Meng Yao's conflicting feelings between Gusu and Qinghe to Xichen. Lan Zhan trusted his brother to create a path forward if that's the direction they wanted to go.

Lan Qiren also watched the byplay between his eldest nephew and their guest without comment. Whatever defense Xichen had mounted on his own behalf had been satisfactory, apparently. Eventually he either got bored of watching or decided to help Xichen make Meng Yao sit still for five consecutive minutes by providing a distraction.

"There's been a development in Qishan," he announced to the room.

Wei Ying stilled at Lan Zhan's side. His tension had been ramping up with every passing day. It was *killing* him to not be in Lotus Pier, but at the same time he flatly refused to even consider taking Lan Zhan from Cloud Recesses when they were under the heaviest threat of attack.

Wen Xu would not find Cloud Recesses an easy target. The barrier failure had put them on edge. Xue Yang's penetration of the sect's upgraded defenses had driven them into a state approaching total paranoia. Two new gates and additional barriers were under construction further down the mountain with maze arrays erected between them. All the safe approaches to Cloud Recesses had been reduced down to one with multiple checkpoints and, taking into account the way Wen Chao maimed one of their inner disciples, small shielded bunkers were built into the mountainside for the guards to retreat into. Wei Ying had been tapped by the artisans' quarter to workshop ideas for new tokens; ones that would be useless to the thief if anyone stole one.

From what Lan Zhan understood, *all* the sects were tending to their own defenses more these days --with the predictable exception of LanlingJin, PinyangYao, and other such stubborn notables.

Lan Qiren waited until he had the attention of the assembled young people. "Wen Ruohan has issued --*invitations* to the young masters of the great sects to attend an educational event in Nightless City."

Lan Zhan was displeased to be right about that. QishanWen had singled GusuLan out from the beginning in the original Sunshot conflict. In retrospect it was clear why. GusuLan had long been a spiritual leader of cultivation society; a bastion of knowledge and elegance that made QishanWen look like bloodthirsty arrogant maniacs in comparison despite Wen Ruohan's position as Chief Cultivator.

The Lan sect's biggest mistake had been in thinking that the Wen sect never noticed.

When Wen Xu came, he came for the very soul of Cloud Recesses. First they'd burned the libraries and killed as many Lan elders as possible, including their sect leader. A rich history of knowledge and culture vanished overnight, save what Xichen had been able to carry away with him. *Then* they'd strong-armed the great sects into sending their young masters to the indoctrination camp; a soulless parody of the annual GusuLan lecture series.

The message they'd been trying to send wasn't particularly subtle.

The Lan sect had never ruled in cultivation society, mainly because they weren't interested in it, but they *could* have if they'd wanted to. They had the numbers, the respect, and perhaps even the arrogance necessary. If someone else was elected as Chief Cultivator then it was only because someone from the Lan sect had declined the appointment first. The Wen sect wanted to be sure that *everyone* knew those days were at an end.

Given the news of Wen Chao's death, he'd dared hope that they'd be spared the whole experience. It had very clearly been his brain child and rapidly devolved from a formal training camp to Wen Chao's personal sadistic playground.

"The Lan elders and I have declined," Lan Qiren continued without noticing Lan Zhan's white knuckled grip on his knees. "I can't see this as anything other than an attempt to take hostages. We'd be fools to just *hand* them that sort of leverage."

"What about the other sects?" Wei Ying might have been trying to pretend that he wasn't asking about YunmengJiang, but he didn't do a very good job of it.

"YunmengJiang sect and QingheNie have also refused." Lan Qiren didn't look in Wei Ying's direction. They were still feeling each other out as inlaws, but Lan Zhan thought the way Lan Qiren trusted Wei Ying to look after the Yin Iron without question was a very good sign. This indirect reassurance to Wei Ying that his sect brother wasn't being thrown to the Wen wolves was another. "I have not heard about LanlingJin, but many of the smaller sects who sent their agreement have since reversed their decisions once they heard that the sons of the greater sects would not be attending."

"Jin sect and Wen sect are very nearly friendly," Meng Yao pointed out. "They already enrich each other through the spice and horse trades. It's unlikely Jin was included in the invitation for any reason except for show. Jin Zixuan and Jin Zixun wouldn't be in any danger from Wen Ruohan."

One might think that, but Jin Zixun hadn't been sent at all in Lan Zhan's memories and Jin Zixuan would have gotten himself killed on the first day if not for his pretty and clever lieutenant. Lan Zhan was never entirely sure that hadn't been the plan all along.

Jin Guangshan and his nephew got along far better than he and his son ever would.

Jin Zixuan was also crucial to Jin-furen's power base. Among a conservative set like her marital sect, she'd become a lot more manageable for Jing Guangshan once she no longer was mother to the sect heir. She was now past her easy bearing years and even young women died so *easily* in childbirth.

Jin Guangshan could conceivably even set her aside if he managed to sire a Shu son with a concubine and wanted to elevate him to Di status. Without Jin Zixuan around, there'd be nothing to stop him. Jin Guangshan had plenty of reasons to send his son into danger and hope for a favorable outcome.

Meanwhile, Jin Zixun might not have had his favor, but Jin Guangshan seemed to understand his vices better and to a man like him that was even more desirable.

Even if Jin Guangshan managed to sire a replacement heir, Jin Zixun's power would be entrenched long before the child grew up enough to alter the balance of Jinlintai again so he too had plenty of reason to cooperate in that kind of scheming.

"Koi Tower is such a warren of rumor mongering, back-stabbing, and reputation wars that it's hard to tell if that's true. I can never tell if Jin Guangshan likes his son or if he even remembers that he exists when the Peacock or Jin-furen isn't in the room," Wei Ying murmured and then recoiled when Meng Yao flinched. "Ah, sorry, Meng-xiong."

"I'm aware that Koi Tower has an ugly heart." Meng Yao smiled tightly as he always did when his complicated familial history came up. "The subject cannot always be avoided. Think nothing of it. I'm not offended. If you want to make it up to me, however..." Meng Yao re-situated himself in his seat. It looked like he was running low on stamina. "...I would enjoy hearing you play. Zewu-jun spoke highly of your flute."

Wei Ying ducked his head, embarrassed, but nodded. He had so far avoided playing in any company except Lan Zhan's except as part of his cultivation, something that bothered Lan Zhan not at all. Xichen had hinted a few times that he'd like to hear Wei Ying play recreationally too, but Wei Ying had pretended not to notice and Lan Zhan had selfishly facilitated him.

He played 'Jasmine Flower' as his apology. Xiaodan was such a potent tool that even songs without spiritual intent hung heavy in the air and invoked faint illusions of the images and themes from whatever song Wei Ying chose.

Lan Zhan did not examine his own motivations too closely in summoning Wangji as Wei Ying concluded the piece and said, "Flute and Drums at Sunset." It was a piece they'd played frequently of an evening while on the road so they were well practiced and Lan Zhan could not shake the certainty that if he wasn't stopped, Wei Ying would play 'Wangxian'; a song Lan Zhan was deeply unwilling to share with anyone else, but that Wei Ying would innocently play at any available opportunity.

From there they transitioned into 'White Snow in Early Spring' and a somewhat unpolished interpretation of 'Guangling Melody' that was at least half improvisation since it was not originally meant to be performed as a duet, but Lan Zhan's uncle nodded his approval all the same.

"Did you see that?" Wei Ying asked as they returned to the Jingshi. They were walking slowly. Lan Zhan was enjoying the luxury of being able to walk with a hand placed on his husband's hip. It was the most public display of affection permitted in Cloud Recesses, but they tended to get stares and commentary anywhere else. Lan Zhan dismissed it as noise, but Wei Ying vacillated between doing something even worse in order to make their detractors run away and hiding a flinch depending on how well he was doing that day. In that aspect, Cloud Recesses was a sanctuary for them both. Lan Zhan's sect siblings might not *understand* their relationship, but none would tell him he couldn't or shouldn't have it. "We got a nod."

Lan Qiren's standards for a home performance were rather more lax than in public. Meng Yao had gotten several nods, but Wei Ying had likely not been counting them the way Lan Zhan did.

"We did," he agreed, tracing a path up Wei Ying's side and the ridges of his husband's rib cage through the thin barrier of his clothing as they walked. "Xiongzhong confirmed that we are expected to depart for Yunmeng soon."

He was rewarded by Wei Ying's sharp, interested inhale and darkening eyes. He hadn't been asking about whether the public wedding would proceed as planned. Lan Zhan was learning that a husband must pay attention to subjects his zhiji avoided as much as the ones he pursued.

He didn't put himself forward to compete with Meng Yao for Lan Qiren's approval even though he had to know by now that it was attainable. Lan Zhan thought that was at odds with what he knew of his zhiji, but continued to observe. He'd never seen Wei Ying at home, just as Wei Ying had never seen him in private with his own family. They were both feeling out these new spaces in one another's life. For this he could be patient. Eventually he would understand.

"Lan Zhan..." Wei Ying's pace slowed. "...is there a reason you're angry with A-Yao?"

Lan Zhan paused. "I am not." He looked at Wei Ying. "Do I seem so?"

"Maybe not to anyone else." Wei Ying leaned into his side. "I don't think your brother has noticed yet, but he might soon. So tell me now what the issue is."

Lan Zhan gave the matter serious consideration. He hadn't truly examined his feelings in so much detail. "You want Shufu to like you," he said eventually. "I want you to have the things you want."

"A-Yao wants the same thing for much the same reason. I think he deserves to have it too," Wei Ying pointed out as they resumed their pace. "It's not a competition."

*'It is.'* Lan Zhan thought mulishly, but did not say it. Even he could not honestly claim that his uncle's heart was so small that it could not accommodate two new additions.

"Are you worried that if he doesn't start to like me then history will repeat itself?"

That --*was* closer to the truth, Lan Zhan realized. It was still not totally accurate, but yes. Lan Zhan *did* have that fear, once he started thinking along those lines.

"I do not want for Shufu to become the next Yu-furen in your life," he admitted. While he'd personally profited from her antipathy for Wei Ying, he still thought back to the satisfied look on her face as she looked at the Wall of Discipline; her anticipation that this match would make Wei Ying suffer. "I want you to be happy here."

The words 'with me' hung unspoken between them.

“Hey.” Wei Ying made him stop and when Lan Zhan would not look in his direction and cupped his cheek to direct him into meeting his gaze. “I like you,” he said quietly, and then *distinctly*, “I love you.”

Lan Zhan felt stillness settle over him like snow. Those words fell into a place inside him that had been empty until now and began to fill it. He’d told himself before he didn’t have to hear it, that ‘yes’ was all the answer he’d ever need.

Had he been lying to himself?

Wei Ying tipped their foreheads together to meet.

“It’s *always* been you. Even when you smashed my wine jar, I still wanted you more than air,” he confessed. “It can’t be anyone else *but* you. Wherever you are is where I always want to be. I’d live with *five* Yu-furens if it meant I just got to sit next to you sometimes.”

He didn’t want that. He didn’t want *any* difficulty in Wei Ying’s life. They’d both had their fill of suffering.

“No Yu-furens,” he said and turned his face into Wei Ying’s palm to luxuriate in the feeling of being *chosen*.

“*One* Yu-furen,” Wei Ying chuckled and rubbed the pad of his thumb along the ridge of Lan Zhan’s cheekbones. “Stop staring at Meng Yao like you’re keeping score. I’ve almost worn him down into being friends. He’ll stay up in the rafters for the rest of time if he thinks anyone in this family dislikes him even a tiny bit.”

*This* family.

Lan Zhan immediately forgot whatever it was he’d been mad about. He must have been. Wei Ying had said so, but the details scattered away from him and he couldn’t muster the interest necessary to gather them back up.

“Mn,” he agreed.

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They arrived at Yunmeng Dock in a boat Xichen (or possibly Meng Yao) had slyly commissioned specifically for the occasion and later for Lan Zhan and Wei Ying’s use afterwards while travelling between Gusu and Yunmeng. It was a broad and comfortably flat river boat with an elegantly appointed cabin shaded by pale dip-dyed gauze curtains that ran from white to the deepest shade of ocean blue. There was a set of more practical weathertight shutters waiting in Gusu, but the weather was fine enough that Lan Zhan’s brother had decided to put on a show.

For that reason, a stack of gifts also sat in prominence at the bow of their vessel. They were not wrapped in red because Lan Zhan’s wedding contract strictly excluded bridal gifts and dowries, but this was where Meng Yao’s influence had begun to make itself obvious.

In the days leading up to their departure, Xichen had quietly confided to Lan Zhan that he'd asked Meng Yao to marry him.

Meng Yao turned him down, citing his inability to serve as the sort of partner a sect leader would require and then retired to his room to be miserable about it for two days straight until Wei Ying went in after him.

He annoyed Meng Yao into eating, walking in the sun, and eventually pretending it had never happened.

Lan Zhan knew his brother was not unaffected, but Xichen frequently came at rejection as a temporary setback. There'd been plenty of times in his childhood when Lan Zhan had declined an honor or responsibility when he didn't feel he was adequately prepared for it.

Xichen always retreated before issuing him smaller bits of the job piecemeal until Lan Zhan was doing whatever it was that had been asked of him in the first place. Then, when Xichen returned to offer the job again he could say, much to Lan Zhan's irritation, "...but *Wangji*, you've already been doing it all this time."

He seemed to be taking that same angle with Meng Yao by enlisting his help with wedding planning. It had worked a little *too* well. Meng Yao stopped sharing his correspondence with Yu-furen from about halfway through the third letter they exchanged and from there entered into planning like many men would go to *war*.

The contents of the packages would be an acceptable bride price for a sect heir, but were packaged like a gift of friendship between clans.

Meng Yao had caught Wei Ying before he left the Jingshi that morning and sent him back in over and over until he came out wearing the most elaborate guan he'd received from the family collection -unrepentantly in the Lan style with a small fortune in black sapphires sparkling on it- over a hairstyle Meng Yao deemed worthy.

Their clothing for the journey had been decided a week in advance. Lan Zhan felt like he'd dressed no differently than usual, but he kept catching his husband staring at him out of the corner of his eye with a look that made him wish they'd either arrived already or that they could turn around and go home.

The boat bypassed Yunmeng dock to proceed to Lotus Pier's private pier directly. There were no decorations just yet. The wedding would not be for several days, but a novice was waiting by the water and darted away as soon as they came into sight.

Jiang Fengmian, Yu Ziyuan, Jiang Cheng, and Jiang Yanli were standing by as they docked with the assistance of many cheerful little Jiang sect shidi and shimei who all smiled and waved at Wei Ying like he'd been gone for *years* instead of just a few months.

In all honesty, the youngest Lan sect novices and juniors weren't far behind them. As annoying as the older generation and some of his contemporaries found him, students blossomed under Wei Ying's attention. He had no official role in training, but an informal



sort of supplementary class had sprung up in the practice fields in the hours after work ended for the day and before the evening meal began.

Wei Ying had not noticed, but Lan Zhan witnessed his uncle strolling past the field far too often for it to be a coincidence. That he had not interfered yet suggested those informal tutoring sessions might become more formal in the future.

Wei Ying would work with anyone on anything and it became clear all too soon that he had been no slouch as a First Disciple. YunmengJiang would feel the loss of his time if they weren't already. Lan Zhan had expected nothing less. Wei Ying was annoyingly good at everything he did, but knowing and seeing were two different things.

Watching his husband be swarmed by ten and eleven year olds demanding to know what he'd brought them explained the delays Wei Ying had inflicted on them in Caiyi, buying local snacks from the river vendors that he then refused to eat.

"*Aiyah*, you're embarrassments, all of you," Wei Ying informed them in a tone that said they absolutely were not and he was soaking in the attention like a tree drank water. "Presents later if I don't sell you all to a tinker first!"

"The tinkers won't take them anymore. They keep coming back." Jiang Wanyin swung out from the pier with the ease of long practice and hauled the bowsprit of their boat in so that the side of the hull butted up against the platform and they could easily disembark. "What the hell is that on your head?"

"Ask my husband. He put it in for me." Wei Ying jumped out of the boat to land nimbly on the pier. He turned back, straddled the space between the boat and the platform with his feet, and held out a hand to Lan Zhan with a smile.

"Ugh, you're *domesticated* now," Jiang Wanyin complained. "I suppose you'll want to sleep inside and everything."

"On a bed even," Wei Ying agreed. "I've been irrevocably spoiled."

Lan Zhan -along with his uncle and maybe Meng Yao- found this verbal sparring to be deeply suspect, but allowed his husband to hand him out of the boat. Jiang Wanyin and Wei Ying knew what they were doing and did it with the wordless coordination of a lifetime spent being two boys roughly the same age in one house.

Wei Ying stayed to help Xichen, Meng Yao, and Shufu the same way. He let the combined sect juniors unload the luggage and gifts onto the dock.

One of the good things about not having brought *bridal* gifts was that no one had to open them right then and there, announcing the contents at volume. Not that Lan Zhan would mind rubbing certain noses in the silver and jade they'd brought with them.

Jiang Fengmian was a difficult man to interpret. He seemed benignly pleased to see the blue and green boxes stack up on the dock, but he looked that way about everything. Yu-furen, meanwhile, did not seem terribly different than normal. Lan Zhan had never seen her when

she *wasn't* poised and tense upon the cusp of violence. This time though, her eyes sought and then settled on Meng Yao who met her attention with a flawless smile that would not have looked out of place on an official in the Imperial palace; beautiful, unreadable, and utterly implacable.

It was actually quite a good skill for the spouse of a sect leader to have and Lan Zhan wanted to be nowhere nearby when Meng Yao realized it.

Shufu and Xichen went to greet Jiang Fengmian and Yu-furen. Jiang Yanli, meanwhile, met them like children who'd just come into the house after an afternoon outside.

"A-Xian, you look so nice!" She plucked happily at the layers of Wei Ying's textured black silk outer robe and the soft gray layer under it, twitching it into studied neatness. Given the months they'd spent together during the lectures, it was all familiar and comfortable fussing. "They are taking good care of you. I'm so glad."

Then she turned her attention on Lan Zhan, which was less familiar and comfortable. "A-Zhan is still so pale!" she cried out like it was a personal failing of hers. Lan Zhan, meanwhile, was uncertain when he'd become '*A-Zhan*.' "A-Xian, you're sure you've..."

"Protein at every meal," Wei Ying replied in the tone of one who already knew where this conversation was headed. That was good. Someone ought to. "His blood is just fine. It's just that the sun wouldn't dare tan such skin, Shijie."

"Let me show you your rooms." She tugged Wei Ying away and Lan Zhan reluctantly let them go.

"Lan-er-gongzi." Meng Yao approached him with the slightly awkward smile Lan Zhan was starting to associate with genuine affection rather than the one he often wore like armor. He dropped his voice, "Are we *very* sure *Yu-furen* is your mother in law?"

"Formally," Lan Zhan allowed. He had not realized Meng Yao might not be familiar with the dynamics between the Jiang main family. He had a way of knowing about things and how people related to each other, but then again he'd spent his time at Cloud Recesses with either Nie-er-gongzi or Xichen. If he saw Wei Ying it was often only when Lan Zhan was there.

"...but practically speaking?" Meng Yao looked back in the direction Wei Ying and Jiang Yanli had vanished in. "I think I see now. Jiang-guniang seems to approve of how you've been caring for your spouse."

"Was that your purpose?" Lan Zhan asked. He knew he ought to go after them to see these promised rooms, but he was only just becoming used to Wei Ying's constant brand of affection. Affectionate sisterly smothering was something he had no resistance built up against. "The gifts. Making us dress. The boat."

The boat had perhaps been Xichen's idea originally, but he wouldn't have commissioned anything half as nice without someone to suggest it.

“Ah! I’m caught.” Meng Yao shook his head. “No. I had another objective in mind.” His gaze slid towards Yu-furen and narrowed. “This is just a happy coincidence.”

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The shape of Meng Yao’s subtle war with Yu-furen began to show its shape over the following days as preparations for the wedding began in earnest.

Wei Ying was temporarily absorbed back into the Jiang sect. He slept in his own rooms when he wasn’t packing up their contents. He ate with his adoptive family and trained with the Jiang disciples. Lan Zhan missed his husband’s constant presence at his side, but was determined to allow Wei Ying the freedom to indulge his homesickness.

Wei Ying joined them for the evening meal and then stayed for their customary music and conversation before bed. On the first day, Lan Zhan noticed nothing. On the second, he thought he saw an invisible weight drop off Wei Ying’s shoulders as he entered the room that the Jiangs had set aside for the Lan family members to use as a common space. On the third day he knew he wasn’t imagining it because Wei Ying appeared without any of the guans they’d brought with them. Instead he had pulled back in a simple leather thong.

They ate in silence and afterwards Wei Ying launched the conversation with a story about the training field, leaving Lan Zhan to question himself. He wasn’t acting wrong, but something *felt* wrong. It felt like that night when he’d found Wei Ying drinking, shortly ahead of Wen Guniang’s diagnosis.

Wei Ying had been cooperative about taking his tea. Lan Zhan had played Serenity for him before they’d left Cloud Recesses. The doctors and Wen-guniang had warned him that might not prevent him from dropping into another spiritual low, but they’d gone so long without one that Lan Zhan had dared hope that routine care was enough to keep it at bay.

Lotus Pier was the place Wei Ying loved better than anywhere else so why was this happening *here*?

Lan Zhan could guess at reasons, but there was no Jingshi here for them to retreat to or any other place free of curious ears for them to talk it out. The water carried all sorts of sounds to seemingly arbitrary corners of Lotus Pier, he’d discovered.

Xichen summoned his guqin as Wei Ying’s story drew to an end and, after exchanging an impenetrable look with his uncle and Meng Yao, began to play Clarity.

Wei Ying leaned forward like someone had punched him in the solar plexus, but caught himself before Lan Zhan did. “*Ow,*” he muttered and sagged into Lan Zhan’s side. “*That’s* doing something.”

“Do you want the tea?” Lan Zhan tried to remember where he’d packed it.

“Mmm.” Wei Ying closed his eyes and turned his face into Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “Maybe. I thought I was making it up.”

“I’ve brought the sachets,” Meng Yao said as he went to the tea service. This had evidently been expected.

“How obvious was I?” Wei Ying asked in the tone he used when he was deeply embarrassed and trying to brazen it out.

“Hardly at all,” Meng Yao replied as he took one of the loaded paper twists out of his sleeve and dumped it into the iridescent black tea pot that they’d been given to use. “Zewu-jun and Shufu were walking on the Lotus Garden path yesterday.”

The way Wei Ying went still in Lan Zhan’s arms was a bad sign. Something had happened.

Shufu had been quiet up until that point. He stood then and took something out of his sleeve.

It was the black sapphire guan.

Lan Zhan could count the number of times he’d voluntarily witnessed his uncle voluntarily touch someone outside of the family on one hand.

They both held very still as he knelt in front of Wei Ying and pinned it over the leather insult he’d arrived wearing. “If she says anything again...” he said, rising and tugging on his beard. “...refer her to me.”

‘She’ being Yu-furen.

*“What did she say to you?”* Lan Zhan hardly recognized his own voice and going from the startled look he received from his brother and uncle, neither did they.

Did they need this second wedding? The contracts were signed. Lan sect and the head family had already welcomed Wei Ying into Cloud Recesses. Jiang Yanli recognized him as her brother-in-law and Jiang Wanyin thought whatever his sister told him to. He’d wanted Wei Ying to have the honor and spectacle of a public wedding, but not at this price.

Wei Ying didn’t answer and instead pressed his thumb between Lan Zhan’s brows, smoothing away the furrow that had formed there. Lan Zhan resisted. He would *not* be soothed or distracted from this topic.

“She had a great many things to say to everyone. From what I understand, Yu-furen was the only one who walked away from the table without a cut.” Meng Yao came over with a cup of the bitter smelling tea on a small saucer made to look like a nine-petaled lotus. Lan Zhan considered smashing it, but it would only upset his husband worse than he already was. Wei Ying took it in a single shot and grimaced as the taste hit him. “I’ve instructed the Lan disciples to move your things into Lan-er-gongzi’s room. Shufu and Zewu-jun would prefer it if you kept closer to the family in the future.”

“Well, she arrived with one,” Wei Ying muttered loyally, but didn’t protest being forcibly moved. That said quite a lot all on its own. “It’s...complicated.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that Jiang-zongzhu tends to try and exclude his wife from family gatherings,” Meng Yao agreed and poured him another cup. Wei Ying was meant to drink the

entire infusion. “So she has to invite herself, arrives with hurt feelings, and invariably lashes out; most often at her children since she seems unable to hurt Jiang-zongzhu back in any other way.”

“Maybe not *that* complicated.” Wei Ying relented. “Jiang-shushu is formally adopting me into the family as a Shu son. Yu-furen doesn’t like it and they’ve been fighting about it. He’s trying to shield us from it. It didn’t work out very well.”

Lan Zhan reluctantly acknowledged that *would* be a tense issue. That would be all but confirming to cultivation society that Wei Ying was Jiang Fengmian’s illegitimate son and it would take more serenity than ten women could muster to take that laying down when he was already known to favor his foster child over his Di son.

Was Wei Ying really alright with that?

Looking at his husband’s pallor and pinched face, he couldn’t say he thought it was likely. For one thing, this scenario slandered his mother and made his father into an object of ridicule. Perhaps they were dead and beyond caring, but Wei Ying was still alive. Was it really fair for Jiang-zhongzhu to give Wei Ying such a gift with so many horrible strings attached?

He could see why Wei Ying might have agreed, though. As a Shu son of the Jiang inner sect, he was officially a young master of cultivation society instead of just practically one. They were going to draw censure and likely ridicule from the other sects already. It was like Wei Ying to take a personal loss in order to minimize that.

Meng Yao made an unconvinced noise. “Perhaps...” He handed Wei Ying another cup. “...or perhaps he’s stubbornly making it worse.”

Wei Ying glowered, but downed his tea and then the next cup after that. Xichen concluded Clarity and moved into Mend. The soothing spiritual energies rippled over the entire company and Lan Zhan found he was able to loosen his grip on the nugget of anger in his chest.

Wei Ying would come home with him as his husband in the eyes of all cultivation society. They would return to Gusu for the rest of the year and by the time they returned to Yunmeng he’d have a better plan to deal with the dysfunctions of his in-laws. They’d both just have to bear it for now.

“What did she say to you?” Lan Zhan asked again, once he’d felt Wei Ying relax a little in his arms.

“Hmm?” His eyes were heavy-lidded. Lan Zhan did not like that he had no idea how well his husband had been sleeping. “Ah.” He ducked his head. “Shijie and Jiang Cheng got it worse.”

“There is no benefit to repeating it,” Shufu said repressively, which meant that whatever it was had been deeply insulting and it was perhaps better that he didn’t know how angry he ought to be while they were still guests at Lotus Pier.

Having Wei Ying back in his bed was a small comfort that night. He did not dare initiate sex given that he didn't know who would overhear them, but Wei Ying was notably softer when they woke the next morning; Lan Zhan on his back and Wei Ying sprawled half across his chest. They took extra care in helping one another dress for the day after having been denied that intimacy for half a week.

Lan Zhan didn't often do Wei Ying's hair for him, but he did that day and pinned his husband's top knot with the jet and obsidian guan.

"You always pick this one out," Wei Ying observed while tilting his head back to look up at Lan Zhan. "You like it?" He asked flirtatiously.

"I like it on Wei Ying," Lan Zhan admitted. He would have laid it over a red ribbon if he'd been in a mood to see his husband in anything even approaching Jiang colors. "Will you indulge this husband?"

"Always." Wei Ying's smile flickered. "It wasn't entirely about the guan yesterday." He shut his eyes and leaned back into Lan Zhan's midsection. "She said I was dressing so finely that I must think I'm a young master now. Then Jiang Cheng tried to change the subject by asking about the wedding. She asked why he was so excited for the wedding of his servant and did he think his father would pay half as much attention to *his* wedding now that his real son had married. Shijie was peeling lotus seeds for the table and she had something to say about that too; did she expect to enter Koi Tower as a bride or a maid?"

He found he did understand a bit. Yu-furen had used Wei Ying's happiness as a weapon to hurt his siblings. For himself, Wei Ying forgot pain as soon as it healed. For his loved ones he had a longer memory. Yu-furen would soon be his adopted mother so he couldn't speak against her, not that he could before either. There were plenty of rules Wei Ying would cheerfully break, but the structure of filial piety wasn't one of them. All he could do was remove the easy targets from her reach.

Lan Zhan rarely felt sympathy for Jiang Wanyin, but in that moment he came about as close as he ever would. The adult Jiang Wanyin replicated all his mother's worst personality traits despite having borne the brunt of them for years so it wasn't much.

It was easier to be angry on his sister-in-law's behalf.

"You *are* a young master," Lan Zhan replied instead of inviting Jiang Yanli to relocate to Cloud Recesses until her own marriage. "You were a young master before. I seem to recall there being a list."

"Nie-xiong's bachelor rankings?" Wei Ying snorted and covered one of Lan Zhan's hands - the one resting on his shoulder - with his own. "We're neither of us on *that* list anymore."

"Mn." That was true and soon the cultivation world would know it.

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Lan Zhan had hoped that the arrival of other guests would give Yu-furen fewer opportunities to lambast her foster son and in some ways he got his wish. He had not realized how much

time on average Wei Ying spent kneeling in the Jiang shrine until Nie-er-gongzi was around to require entertainment. No wonder he'd been so unmoved by being beaten or asked to kneel on the gravel in their original history.

For Wei Ying punishment was unpredictable and nothing that he could avoid, so why bother?

His husband began to appear at more meals and Meng Yao started walking to his appointments like he expected to have to kick down a door. On one notable occasion he returned to their sitting room seemingly fine except he took himself over to the wall and knelt facing it for ten minutes because he couldn't maintain his expression to his own satisfaction. Xichen tried to intervene and was sent back to his seat looking alarmed.

The reason why became clear when the time for the adoption ceremony drew close and it was revealed that Jiang Fengmian had reversed his decision to adopt Wei Ying in as a Shu son. Instead, the memorial tablets for Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren were quietly transitioned from the outer hall of the Sect Shrine into the inner chamber where only the memorials for the ancestors of the main family were permitted to be.

Wei Ying was welcomed to the Jiang inner sect as the oldest Di son of the second Di son of Jiang Fengmian's generation. The look on Jiang Wanyin's face when he had to haltingly call Wei Ying 'Biao-ge' was priceless. He should have been 'Tang-ge', but Jiang Fengmian hadn't altered Wei Changze's name on his memorial tablet so 'Biao-ge' it was and Wei Ying remained *Wei Ying*.

His status within Jiang sect was still somewhat ambiguous, but Wei Ying had referred to Jiang Fengmian as 'Shushu' for his entire life. This solidified his right to do so.

"I regarded him as my brother in life," was all Jiang Fengmian could be persuaded to say on the subject afterwards. "I am happy to finally be able to welcome him as my family in death."

He would not say who persuaded him. Lan Zhan didn't need to be told. Meng Yao became conspicuously deaf whenever someone brought the matter up in conversation, but the results were so good that he couldn't be mad about it.

A weight fell from Wei Ying's shoulders and soon he was back to his normal self. Even Yu-furen was slightly less obstreperous to deal with although Lan Zhan was careful to make sure that her unsupervised time with his husband came to an abrupt and total end.

Meng Yao and his uncle seemed determined to facilitate that decision to the extent of denying Yu-furen face to face time with either of them and proceeded to insulate them from the planning as much as possible. For some things though, like planning the banquet, they couldn't invent a mysterious errand to send him and his husband on right before.

"Since when is there going to be a *hunt*?" Wei Ying asked in alarm, echoing Lan Zhan's thought, as soon as he realized they were discussing *banquets* and not just *a banquet*.

"It's one of the events to lure in extra attendees," Meng Yao replied. "It was Zewu-jun's thought. The hunt and an archery competition will lure in representatives of sects who might

not choose to attend the wedding. He discussed it with Jiang-zongzhu who agreed. If they attend the pre-events then they'll be obligated to stay for the wedding. It was a last minute change. Forgive me, Wei-gongzi, I forgot to mention it."

Lan Zhan could even see his brother's method. The more people who acknowledged *their* union, the fewer there would be who could object to Xichen's when he finally persuaded Meng Yao to take the bows with him.

For that, he could tolerate a hunt.

"You'll both be hosting in the stands," Yu-furen added while reading through one of the proposed menus Meng Yao had furnished in an attempt to provide a reasonable middle ground between searing Yunmeng cuisine and dietary restrictions of Cloud Recesses. She sneered a little, but did not comment.

Perhaps she was thinking of the opportunities Jiang Wanyin would have to shine during the pre-events without his inconveniently talented shixiong around to steal the glory.

Lan Zhan squeezed his husband's hand, but Wei Ying didn't protest. His gaze was a little distant and that led him to recall the last grand hunt they'd attended together.

Perhaps Wei Ying was glad for the excuse to miss it too.

Things began to move very quickly. Meng Yao and Yu-furen settled their vicious feuds over how many lotuses and how many clouds would appear on the wedding costumes, who would sit where and next to whom, and what quantity of wine would be permitted at the groom's table.

There Yu-furen was an oddly staunch proponent in what she thought was Wei Ying's favor because he was a known connoisseur of wine, but only because she thought Meng Yao's attempts to replace it with water or tea were the Lan Disciplines rearing their ugly collective head and she was determined to make it clear that the Lan had already *had* their dedicated ritual.

Wei Ying had not told his foster parents about his spiritual malaise and by this point Lan Zhan thought he might be onto something. He did not want to see Wei Ying's condition used as a weapon the next time Yu-furen needed a soft spot to aim for.

The wedding bed was made. The hunting grounds was stocked with prey. A battalion of brilliantly colored kites had been crafted for the archery competition. The only thing left was for the final guests to arrive.

Nie-er-gongzi had arrived early, mostly to loaf about Yunmeng and inveigle Wei Ying to go out to drink with him. Jiang Wanyin was a surprising ally on this front. He tagged along and just drank whatever anyone put down in front of his brother on those evenings, displaying a capacity for alcohol that approached Wei Ying's. Lan Zhan was still glad when Nie Mingjue arrived, which put a sudden halt to those particular outings.



MeishanYu sent a startling number of young women -all nieces and younger cousins of Yu-furen herself- that Lan Zhan and Wei Ying were obliged to entertain far too frequently. He came to understand much too late that Yu-furen had heard the term 'surrogate' during the marriage negotiations and interpreted it as 'second wife in all but name.'

The Yu sect had been trying to forge a connection with GusuLan for decades despite their incompatible attitudes and was taking full advantage of the opportunity their kinswoman had won for them. Yu-furen was actually quite calm in comparison to her maternal relatives, disturbingly enough. Her young cousins and nieces all had sharp tongues and sharper knives, which they used against each other without hesitation. Two of them ended up mysteriously falling into the lake, but the weather was warm and there were female Jiang disciples on hand to cover them up or fish them out in the event that someone couldn't swim so Yu-furen had apparently been prepared for this level of in-fighting.

No wonder Shufu had turned an about-face on the subject of bloodline heirs.

Yu-furen had managed to lock them into having any of their biological children raised primarily in Yunmeng by stipulating where their potential surrogate could live. Now she was working to install a lady of MeishanYu into that position; betting that any children sired would be Lan Zhan's rather than Wei Ying's and that they could be raised to be partial to their mother's family. Lan Zhan felt like an idiot when he finally realized just how badly his family had been outmaneuvered and hoped his brother at least learned from that mistake when it came to his own matters. he didn't necessarily trust Jin Guangshan not to suddenly develop an interest in his by-blow if he thought he could get some concessions from Lan sect out of it.

The joke would be on her. Lan Zhan had never wanted children until he had one. He had never been confident enough in his ability to nurture before he had A-Yuan. Now he *did* want a child, but it was just one in particular and no woman of MeishanYu could give him back his Sizhui.

He did not know whether or not he'd be granted the honor of becoming Sizhui's father a second time. Lan Zhan still wanted it. Specifically, he wanted the opportunity to raise A-Yuan with Wei Ying -- *but* he also wanted a world where his son never knew loss to begin with so he tried hard to put the matter out of his mind and trusted Wen Qing to look after her family.

Wei Ying was a natural charmer, but the young ladies of Yu were determinedly attentive to Lan Zhan in equal and unwanted measure.

It left him irritable and less in control of his need for Wei Ying's undivided attention in the evenings. The only silver lining to that was the way Wei Ying's mood -still chronically low in response to the tensions in his ancestral home and his memories of seeing it burn- improved considerably as a result.

Other smaller sects either sent bored representatives who spent most of their time taking in the sights of Yunmeng or their excuses and a wedding gift. It was all blessedly ordinary.

He and his husband found time for each other amidst all that. Wei Ying made good on his old promises to show Lan Zhan all of Yunmeng. They picked lotus seeds and water chestnuts.

Wei Ying showed Lan Zhan his favorite hunting trails and fishing spots. They took a boat out onto the lakes and spent an afternoon napping in the sunshine where no one could find them.

Jin clan arrived on the final day before the competitions in the form of Jin-furen, her retinue, and her son who arrived drenched in nervous sweat with eyes for Jiang Yanli and no one else.

“Oh no, it’s *this* phase,” Wei Ying complained as they observed him observing Jiang-guniang as she made small talk with Jin-furen. “I thought we wouldn’t have to watch this for years yet.”

“Mn.” Lan Zhan did not think that Jin Zixuan had quite come around to Jiang Yanli’s charms yet. This seemed like something else to him and he recalled all the blustering Jin Zixun had done on his cousin’s behalf. The Jin’s sect heir still seemed very much like a child to Lan Zhan and no child ever wanted any toy more than the one he thought someone else had just shown an interest in.

He was still unclear as to just what Jin Zixuan had thought was going on between Jiang Yanli and either him or his brother -an alternate betrothal negotiation or something less honorable- but his presence at the wedding was a positive sign for his sister-in-law’s future happiness.

In all honesty, Lan Zhan recalled very little of the archery competition or the grand hunt. There was no great upset to interrupt competitions and Wei Ying had been styled to within an inch of his life. It was very distracting.

He and Wei Ying were seated next to each other in the stands between Jiang-zongzhu, Xichen, and Shufu. Yu-furen was entertaining her friend and Meng Yao was running himself ragged. Lan Zhan would have been concerned except he seemed so genuinely pleased about it.

Although he himself did not attend them, Koi Tower had hosted many excellent events under Jin Guangyao’s leadership. He was a gracious and capable host as well as an unobtrusive leader, which had come as a collective relief to cultivation society following his father’s heavy handed tenure as Chief Cultivator.

Later Wei Ying would brag about how well his brother and shidi did in the archery contest. Jiang swept the stand with Jin coming after mostly, due to Jin Zixuan. Kite shooting was a Yunmeng hobby after all and wildly disparaged by the other sects as children’s games up until now. Lan sect redeemed themselves during the hunt itself and shared top scores with their hosts, who had the homeground advantage.

All of it was secondary to Wei Ying’s hand in his as they sat in the place of honor to host the visiting sect dignitaries. No one disparaged their match to their faces, bracketed as they were by their own sect leaders, and the most likely culprit had been left behind at Koi Tower by his aunt.

Jin-furen did not state outright that she’d left her nephew behind because his manners couldn’t be relied on, but Meng Yao evidently overheard Jin Zixuan try to explain to Jiang Wanyin without *explaining* to Jiang Wanyin that the small party from Lanling was not

intended as an insult from Jin to Jiang or Lan, especially not to Jiang Yanli and had Jiang Wanyin perhaps happened to see her around anywhere? Did he think she might want to take a walk and get some air after all that wedding business?

Jin Zixuan would have had better luck shooting down the *actual* sun than catching Jiang Yanli for a walk. Aside from Meng Yao, she was the most heavily involved member of the Jiang sect because she had direct oversight of the kitchens and they'd been laying in supplies and cooking for *days*.

The wedding itself was likewise a blur because they were resettled into rented rooms in Yunmeng the night before and most of the following day was an unbearable parade of rituals. They couldn't quite agree who should be 'picked up' so both parties met in the town square to process into Lotus Pier surrounded by a celebration of firecrackers, drums, and bells.

They both underwent the tests meant for a groom. Jiang Wanyin challenged Lan Zhan to a duel while Jiang Yanli stuck to the more traditional challenge of making him eat something sour, bitter, sweet, and finally spicy. That last was hot enough to make sweat spring up on Lan Zhan's *entire body*. She just smiled and said she was glad he was adequately prepared for his married life when he managed to bow and thank her for the meal.

Shufu meanwhile made Wei Ying recite all of Virtue out of order, but *Xichen* made Wei Ying perform in front of the entire wedding party and of course there was only one song he would ever play if asked to choose.

Lan Zhan still hated hearing 'Wangxian' played in mixed company, but he found he didn't mind it so much this one time in the awed hush that fell over their families as the longing notes rolled over them bolstered by Xiaodan's potent voice. Wei Ying didn't take his eyes off Lan Zhan even once during his performance so their presence really was just incidental.

No one in attendance could miss the power in Wei Ying's music, unformed as it was, and Lan Zhan was gratified to see a bit of hesitation appear on the faces of his mother and father-in-law as they realized there might have been a *reason* -other than Lan Zhan's obvious affections- for Lan sect to bargain as hard as they had for primary custody of Wei Ying as a cultivator.

After all, Meng Yao had spent the entire visit making *absolutely sure* they'd realize that whatever they thought they'd gotten out of the deal would have been cheap at twice the price.

The tea ceremony was also non-traditional as there were two grooms so the protocol over whose family was served first was no longer clear. In the end, their families agreed to be served alongside each other since Lan Zhan and Wei Ying would be shared between the two sects.

The banquet slid by in a blur as their wedding night loomed. Lan Zhan vaguely recalled that the food was good and Wei Ying would wax rhapsodic about it for actual days, but nothing was so good as the moment when their bedroom door closed behind him and Lan Zhan no longer had to share his husband's attention.

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They both slept in the following day. The Lan Disciplines had nothing to say on the subject of the first morning of one's married life, but it was a traditional courtesy in Cloud Recesses to spend that time focused on one's spouse in anticipation of a lifetime spent together. If they got two weddings then it stood to reason that they should have two first mornings.

He and Wei Ying emerged somewhere around noon into absolute pandemonium. All the elders still in residence had shut themselves up into Lotus Hall. Jin sect had departed in the night, making all speed for Koi Tower. Nie sect wasn't far behind. They were only waiting for Nie-zongzhu to emerge from the closed door conference.

They found Meng Yao pacing outside the hall looking as distressed as they'd ever seen him.

"Meng-xiong?" Wei Ying gently got his attention and when Lan Zhan got a better look at their future brother-in-law's face he realized Meng Yao's complexion was totally bloodless. "What's wrong?"

"Forgive me." Meng Yao retreated a step and bowed. "I should be congratulating you, but..." He swallowed. "...word of an attack on Pingyang Yao reached Lotus Pier after you two retired for the evening. They were all but wiped out."

Lan Zhan had known that the Wen would throw off their pretense of restraint sooner or later. Somehow he'd hoped they wouldn't lose anyone in this life, but no. Qishan had just turned their swords on a smaller target than Cloud Recesses or Lotus Pier. They'd spent a year swallowing up the smaller sects in his memory. He shouldn't be so shocked or dismayed.

"The survivors turned to Lanling Jin," Meng Yao whispered. "Jin-zongzhu set out with an expedition to drive the occupying Wen forces out of Pingyang. They killed each other almost down to the last man."

"Come on. You need to sit down and maybe eat something." Wei Ying started to bully Meng Yao away from the closed door of Lotus Hall. "Have you been up all night?"

"I... suppose I have?" Meng Yao squinted up at the sun as though he'd never seen it before. "I couldn't retire. How could I?"

His father had just died. They'd never had a relationship and now they never would. Lan Zhan wished he could explain to Meng Yao that really, he was lucky. Now he'd never find out what kind of humiliations life in Jinlintai would have held for him.

He still let them take him away, focus turned inwards, even as Jiang Yanli fed them leftovers from the banquet and plied them with tea.

Exhaustion caught up to Meng Yao as the needs of his body had been attended to and once they'd settled him in his room, Wei Ying and Lan Zhan returned to theirs for a conversation.

"*Jin Guangshan* volunteered to take back Pingyang?" Wei Ying hissed incredulously as they closed the door behind them. "I'm not confusing him with anyone else, am I?"

“No.” Lan Zhan pulled Wei Ying into his lap because there was no restraint between spouses and this was the first day of their completed marriage. He would not miss Yao-zongzhu, *or* Jin-zongzhu for that matter. Wei Ying had missed the worst of the latter’s excesses. Later, he’d have to explain what a humiliation cultivation society had missed out on with his early death in an honorable battle. If their mysterious benefactor won against Wen Ruohan then Jin Guangshan would have still been well positioned to take up the mantle of Chief Cultivator since no one in the Lan sect was likely to suddenly develop either the interest or availability. “I sense the hand of our friend in these events.”

“Mm,” Wei Ying agreed, settling in. “The timing was advantageous. All the major sect leaders between Laoling and Pingyang were out of the way in Yunmeng where they couldn’t easily be asked for help. I’m still surprised he went.”

“It would depend on how accurate the intelligence he received about the surviving Wen forces was...” Lan Zhan could picture an easy scenario. “...and what treasures Jin-zongzhu thought he could reclaim from the ruins of Pingyang.”

The man had a nose for gold and power. Jin sect had prospered under him even if no one else had. Fighting a pitched battle to avenge Pingyang Yao was not in the man’s nature. Clearing out a few Wen stragglers and looting the ruins of the Yao sect before anyone else could get there sounded far more in character.

“Whether they were really there or not,” Wei Ying agreed, thumbing his nose in thought. “I wonder how our friend benefited from removing Jin Guangshan from the board though?”

“His behavior regarding you and the Stygian Tiger Amulet was typical of the latter years of his tenure as Chief Cultivator. He got very good at stirring the sects up into an indignant mob out for the blood of a strawman of his creation. Then Jin sect would sweep in to clean up the fighting and often pocketed whatever the sects were fighting over for ‘safekeeping,’” Lan Zhan explained quietly. “You were correct when you accused the Jin sect of attempting to replace the Wen empire. They did. Jin Guangshan’s hand didn’t lay as heavily on our necks as Wen Ruohan’s, but it got heavier with every passing year until his death. Jin sect made free to command our disciples and re-distribute our territories. The great sects couldn’t challenge Jin after the Sunshot campaign and he made sure we never recovered enough to try later. I can understand why our friend might have decided to remove him from play early on.”

“The peacock wouldn’t keep Jin out of the war.” Wei Ying leaned back into Lan Zhan’s chest. “In fact, I think he can’t. He has to avenge his father to stabilize his powerbase. I’d be impressed except our wedding got taken advantage of.”

Lan Zhan kissed his temple. “Call it a wedding gift.” *He* certainly was.

“The mysterious death of my enemies?” Wei Ying chuckled. “Alright, maybe you’re right.”

More details emerged as the day wore on. A messenger arrived by sword from Qinghe, where they’d received word that Wen Xu had still been in Pingyang and setting up a supervisory office there when the Jin cultivators arrived. According to the survivors, Jin Guangshan managed to kill him shortly before succumbing to his battle wounds.

Jin Zixun died in the fighting too, but when Lan Zhan attempted to share his relief with Wei Ying his husband cocked his head and asked, “Who?”

It was a reassuring, if frustrating reaction. He’d never really believed that Wei Ying had cursed the man. His husband either hounded his enemies to the ends of the world or forgot they existed as soon as they were out of sight.

Lan Zhan had a very long memory and did not forgive easily. Sometimes he envied Wei Ying’s easy indifference to antagonism.

They’d meant to stay in Yunmeng longer, but Xichen ordered the boat packed before sundown. The Yin Iron was under considerable guard and containment in Cloud Recesses, but no one felt easy leaving it alone at the moment even if Wen Ruohan had just lost the last of his two mobile strike forces.

Wei Ying took every second he could, hugging his siblings goodbye. The odds that Lotus Pier would be attacked by the Wen were very slight, but not non-existent.

The trip between Yunmeng and Gusu was two or three days by normal means, but a group of very determined cultivators willing to switch off powering a propulsion talisman could make the journey in a little over one.

That delay meant that their party arrived in Caiyi shortly ahead of a messenger in Dafan Wen colors, but also a white mourning sash.

Lan Zhan recognized the man. He’d met him briefly in the Burial Mounds, but had never learned his name beyond ‘Fourth Uncle.’

Wen Qing had said that they were rejecting the Wen sect, yet here was her precious uncle back in their family colors before Wen Ruohan’s body even got a chance to cool.

“Forgive me for approaching you so casually, Lan-zongzhu,” Fourth Uncle greeted them from a short distance away, having caught them in the middle of unloading the boat. “I was informed that Cloud Recesses is not currently accepting visitors and I have news of utmost importance.”

Xichen’s gaze rested briefly on the white sash. Among sects, messengers wearing that sash arrived to announce the deaths of sect leaders. If Jin-zongzhu had died any other way then the courier announcing his demise would have been wearing gold and white.

“Please, share your message,” Xichen invited him.

Fourth Uncle removed a red and gold brocade encased letter and offered it up to Xichen, bowing deeply. Meng Yao accepted it on his behalf and cracked the seal before anyone could stop him, but no curse or trap activated so he surrendered it to Xichen with his own low bow.

Xichen unrolled the letter, read it with an expression that grew ever more grave with every line, and then handed it to Shufu who received it no better.

Fourth Uncle waited until Shufu closed the scroll. "Wen-zongzhu, Wen Qionglin, regrets that he cannot host the traditional celebrations expected of a new sect leader. Given current circumstances, he begs your indulgence and formally renounces his claim to the seat of Chief Cultivator. At present, Wen sect is unable to fulfill the responsibilities of the office," he informed them.

"Perfectly understandable." Xichen took a small money pouch out of his sleeve and offered Fourth Uncle two bits of broken gold; a princely tip for princely intelligence. "I regret that I cannot host you in Cloud Recesses. Please allow me to pay for your lodging in Caiyi."

"This servant thanks you and passes on my master's wishes for a good relationship between DafanWen and GusuLan in the future." Fourth Uncle bowed a final time and departed, oblivious to the way Wei Ying watched him go.

"Don't ask," Xichen said quietly, as soon as he was gone. "We will discuss it in the Hanshi at home."

It was hard to say whose grip was tighter on whose hand as they travelled back up the mountain, Wei Ying's or Lan Zhan's.

His heart did not quiet until they arrived in front of the first white gate of Cloud Recesses, attended by two slightly bored guards who snapped to attention at the first sight of their returning elders.

Wei Ying's brow crinkled as they got near to the island of quiet where the Jingshi, the Hanshi, and the other private houses of the main family resided. "No one got into the house," he reported to their assembled company. "I can hear it from here."

"I apologize, Wuxian," Xichen sighed. "I'd hoped to give you and Wangji a little more time away from it."

He ushered them all into the Hanshi and activated his new privacy wards before dropping onto the cushion at his desk with a pained sound. For once their uncle had nothing to say about his lack of grace. In fact, Shufu found his own rest with every bit as much desperation.

Meng Yao looked at the tea pot, but Xichen shook his head.

"No, everyone sit," he said. "There is news from Qishan."

Lan Zhan and Wei Ying knelt, ready to hear this new twist. He was certain he knew the heart of it; Wen Ruohan's enemy had reached him at last. The 'how' of it was a matter of great interest to him personally.

Wen Ning was certainly in the main line of QishanWen, but there would have been plenty of people in Wen Ruohan's employ and inner circles who would have been better poised to seize power after the DafanWen vanished with Wen Qing.

So how had he ended up *immediately* on the top of the heap with messengers ready to deploy and announce his uncle's sad end?

Xichen wasted no time in explaining.

“Two days ago, shortly after Wen Xu was deployed to Pingyang, the Old Man underneath Nightless City woke.”

## Chapter End Notes

Observations from this chapter somewhat in order:

Is MY terrified of things that are too good? Was getting into Jinlintai an acceptable goal for him because it was just ugly enough for him to feel like he belonged there? Are we all having feels about that? No? Just me?

MY and YZY, meeting face-to-face for the first time, thinking in unison: \*Bitch.\*

LQR and the inescapable karma of inheriting the hyper-competent and emotionally stunted children other people won't take care of.

Has JFM been trying for years to move his childhood friend into the inner shrine? Has his wife been fighting him to death on the subject? Has he finally gotten his way by letting her think he was going to take WWX as his real adopted son and then 'allowing' himself to be persuaded otherwise? Was MY mad because he was trying to engineer a solution for his dumb Lans that didn't involve WWX ever having to hear the word 'whore' in relation to his mother when he suddenly realized he'd been had? WHO KNOWS

(Note on the 'Di' and 'Shu' son distinction. The way I understand it (and correct me if I'm wrong) a 'Di' child is the child of one's legal wife. A 'Shu' child is the child of one's concubine. A 'Shu' child is considered legitimate, but only sort of.)

LWJ, surrounded by girls and getting gayer with every passing second.

For those who have been curious about the tags, here's a summary of the 'Unexploded Cow' card game: "Mad cows in England, and unexploded bombs in France. Two problems with a common solution." You play a savvy entrepreneur who rounds up a herd of mad cows and proceeds to march them through the French Countryside in order to clear leftover ordnance from WW 1 & 2.

In this scenario, the Wen. Ruohan and his sons are the Mad Cows. Unexploded Bombs include people like JGS and Sect Leader Yao.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Most of Qishan was untouched.

It was only Nightless City that was affected by the eruption. In fact, the volcano only erupted just long enough to finish consuming the former seat of the Qishan Wen and then, like the grumpy old man it was named for, rolled over and went right back to sleep.

Wen Qionglin had emerged as the new leader of the Wen sect because there was literally no one left to fight with him over the honor except a few stray soldiers who'd been assigned to Wen Ruohan's 'supervisory offices' outside of Qishan proper. They abandoned their original orders and surrendered themselves to their new sect leader immediately, without complaint.

Given that they had not been present when the heavens finally tired of warning Wen Ruohan about the consequences of his arrogance, no one was too interested in punishing a bunch of confused foot soldiers. The forces under Wen Chao and Wen Xu would have been of more interest to the great sects, but they were already dead down to the last man.

Wen Qing arrived at the foot of Cloud Recesses within two weeks of the fall of Nightless City with a small escort and a case that started to rattle as soon as Wei Ying got near it.

Lan Zhan and his brother stared at it.

"Wen-guniang..." Xichen tucked his hands into his sleeves. "...just how...?" He trailed off, unable to finish his question.

"It was sitting on top of the lava field when we went to search for survivors." She gave the chest sitting between them on the floor of the Lanshi a sour look. "My sect leader would be deeply grateful if GusuLan would take custody of the fragment. DafanWen kept it in Tiannu Temple on Dafan Mountain for generations, but the spiritual force of the mountain has been depleted by the monster it created out of our Goddess Statue. Given our present concerns, we can no longer guarantee its security."

She folded her hands on the floor and bowed until her forehead touched the floor, maintaining a completely straight face the entire time.

Lan Zhan and Wei Ying weren't able to talk to her privately. The Wens were under guard for every second they remained in Cloud Recesses. Wen Qing carried herself like a queen and did not pay it any mind even as she sailed through the white gates and back out of their lives.

The four fragments of the Yin Iron merged together into a solid wheel as soon as they were within a certain proximity and had unimpeded access to one another, which possibly explained why their ancestors had gone to such lengths to separate them.

Unfortunately, that meant the Yin Iron stopped allowing Wei Ying to sleep. It was whole and it was in *agony*.

Xichen made arrangements for a joint excursion between Nie and Lan for one final trip to Dusk Creek Mountain; the only place abandoned enough that they'd run no risk of accidentally involving some hapless villagers in the backlash if the destruction of the Yin Iron went poorly.

Nie Minjue led the expedition himself and handled Wei Ying's increasingly sleep-deprived crankiness like an old hand, which was more than Lan Zhan could say. Wei Ying was getting paler and thinner the longer this went on. It was disconcertingly similar to how he'd looked and acted during the Sunshot campaign and Lan Zhan hated every second of it.

That was not to say that their company was having a stellar time of it either.

"What is that *stench*?" one of the Nie cultivators complained as soon as they were within a certain range of the mountain and the wind had shifted.

"We should have probably burned that thing after we killed it," Wei Ying commented to Lan Zhan as he tied a kerchief under his nose with no regard for either of their dignities. The smell was so horrific though that most of the company copied him as soon as they realized it was working. "It's been months. How is it *still* rotting?"

"There was no time. It was too large and there was no pressing reason to dispose of the corpse," Lan Zhan reminded him, ignoring the way the soldiers nearby had turned to stare.

In the end, though, disposing of the Yin Iron was laughably easy. Wei Ying was right. It wanted to die. It *fought* for the right to die.

They laid it out on the top of Dusk Creek mountain after some soldiers stopped up the mouth of the Tulu Xuanwu's former home and current tomb. It cut down on the smell somewhat, but they had to wait for a solid hour as Nie cultivators stuck their heads inside to see the giant dead monster and then describe it to each other.

Nie-zongzhu didn't ask, but Lan Zhan caught him giving them speculative looks here and there as his troops continued to rant about someone killing a monster like that and *not* shouting about it from the rooftops, totally ignoring the fact that they'd been keeping their presence in Qinghe a secret from the Wen sect at the time.

Once they'd *finally* cleared the area, Wei Ying dropped down into a lotus position and began to play.

That's when they learned that the Yin Iron might be ready to die, but the resentful energy wasn't quite so willing to pass on. Resentful energy was the stuff ghosts were made out of; it was obsession, hatred, greed, and grief. No part of that knew how to let go.

Black clouds came billowing out of the Yin Iron wheel and its partnered sword and stabbed at Wei Ying like knives, but it all froze a few feet away from him in trembling spears before they were sucked incrementally backwards.

Wei Ying's song was one of *those* songs; the Harmonies.

Lan Zhan didn't have a vocabulary equal to describing the music Wei Ying played to sing the Yin Iron sweetly into nothingness. Everytime he tried, no words would fit it. It just *was*.

All told it took about an hour. The Yin Iron shrank and turned dark. Then it began to flake and crumble. The oppressive feel of its resentful energy wavered and faded. Every part of it dwindled away until there was nothing, nothing of it left.

Lan Zhan was there when Wei Ying reeled afterwards. He didn't need confirmation that the Yin Iron was gone. He could feel its absence like the first warm day of spring.

"It's done!" He called down to the Nie cultivators.

"Finally!" Nie Minjue bellowed back before barking out orders to his people. "You two, put Wei-gongzi on a stretcher. If I have to smell that rotting turtle for another minute I will find a way to raise it just so I can kill it twice!"

Wei Ying roused a little bit, but a healer from Nie ordered him to stay on the stretcher.

"You're not just suffering from qi exhaustion," she told him. "There's also the week and a half you spent not sleeping and barely eating. We're going to find the nearest inn that doesn't reek and you can sleep it off *there*."

It ended up taking more than three days for the healer to give Wei Ying the go-ahead to travel. He slept that entire time. It was not so bad as the immediate aftermath of the final battle in Nightless City. Wei Ying woke occasionally to take food, drink water, and let someone sit him up to use a chamber pot. That was a far sight better than the Wei Ying who'd lain in his bed like a corpse and had to have water and broth dripped into his mouth with a rag.

"We'll host you for a bit in Qinghe." Nie Mingjue did not phrase it as an offer. "I have some questions for you anyway. About your wedding," he added, taking in their skeptical expressions. "I don't care about the Yin Iron. It's gone. I have enough old family problems to worry about without adding that to the mix. No, I've got three couples in my inner sect who heard about you and want to know how you negotiated it out between your families. I promised I'd ask." He grimaced. "Huaisang promised I'd ask," he corrected himself.

Nie Minjue did have copious amounts of questions, which Lan Zhan tried to take the brunt of in addition to sharing the ways in which their agreement had gone poorly for them. Those issues would not be of a huge concern to the average cultivator, but Lan Zhan was annoyed enough by MeishanYu to make sure other people would know to guard against that particular issue even though it meant far too much discussion.

They stayed in the Unclean Realm for another week until Wei Ying was not only able to travel, but able to do so comfortably and the send off was spectacular.

Lan Zhan had known most of the cultivators in Nie sect since he was a child and they'd never really done more than tolerate him. Even the women didn't think much of his neat ways or

pretty face. Nie Mingjue only liked him as much as he did for Xichen's sake and maybe because he thought that Lan Zhan might be an example to Nie Huaisang.

On *that* day nearly the entire sect turned out to see them off. It would have been pleasing if Lan Zhan thought it had anything to do with their destruction of the Yin Iron, but no. It was because of the wild stories their escort brought back about the Tulu Xuanwu corpse.

He was prepared to ignore the entire ordeal until he heard Wei Ying's startled inhale as he looked back at the gates of the Unclean Realm.

Lan Zhan followed the direction of his gaze backwards to a spot on the wall where Nie Huaisang was waving them off with his best fan.

Behind him, wearing Nie colors and braids in his hair, was Wen Zhuliu.

Lan Zhan almost didn't recognize him. It had been fifteen years or so, but also Wen Zhuliu looked totally different. He remembered the man as being all but dead inside. He was honorable enough in battle so long as he wasn't receiving orders from his disgusting master, but was never happy about any of it. He was just *there*.

The person standing at Nie Huaisang's shoulder was not waving, but he was settled comfortably at attention; watchful, but relaxed about it. Lan Zhan wasn't sure, but he thought the man might actually be smiling a little bit. It was nothing obvious, just the sort of smile one had when it was a nice day out and the people around you were happy.

Lan Zhan turned to face his husband, who'd turned to him at the same moment.

It was too late. They couldn't turn back.

"Wei Ying..." Lan Zhan tried to say something, but his husband shook his head.

"Let's... let's just go." Wei Ying pulled Suibian out of its sheathe and hopped on. Lan Zhan could only follow.

They flew until they were out of sight of the Unclean Realms and then Wei Ying dropped down into a grassy field where he lay down in the sunshine.

Lan Zhan cared less about grass stains than he did about his husband, not to mention the fact that he'd just had a shock too, so he laid down next to him.

"I don't want to talk about it yet," Wei Ying announced.

So warned, Lan Zhan amended his question to another one that had been bothering him that he couldn't ask while the Nie sect was around.

"What was the name of the song you played against the Yin Iron?" he asked.

Wei Ying blinked at him and rolled over onto his side. "It's one of the Big Harmonies," he admitted. "I don't think it'll ever translate to sheet music, but if I could write it down then I think I'd call it 'Entropy.'"

Then he blinked thoughtfully, “Actually, I bet I could. It’s just, you know...” he rolled over and straddled Lan Zhan’s waist. “...I just remembered we haven’t had a romp in the bedroom since our wedding night. We can’t go on like this, Lan Zhan!”

“*Mn.*” Lan Zhan liked this change of topic and endeavoured to encourage it to its full conclusion.

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Meng Yao was not wearing Qinghe braids by the time they returned to Cloud Recesses. His wardrobe had also gotten a *lot* less green.

“Zhao Zhuliu?” He asked, surprised, when they found him arranging flowers in the Hanshi.

Xichen was nowhere in evidence. Hopefully he hadn’t moved Meng Yao into his rooms in advance of the wedding. He’d be copying Conduct for the rest of time off that happened.

“I’m not surprised you haven’t met him, Lan-er-gongzi. He’s been Nie-er-gongzi’s chief attendant for nearly ten years,” Meng Yao explained. “He’s an extraordinary warrior and Nie-zongzhu has offered to adopt him into the inner sect several times, but he’s declined so far. He’s not dangerous unless you’re interfering in the young master’s business so hardly anyone notices him anymore.”

Wei Ying grinned at Meng Yao, making the man frown.

“What?” Meng Yao leaned slightly away.

“Nie-zongzhu, eh?” Wei Ying’s grin grew teeth as Meng Yao turned brilliantly scarlet. He had so far stuck to the familiar intrasect ‘zongzhu’ when speaking about Nie Mingjue. If he was referring to Nie Mingjue as the leader of somebody else’s sect then Xichen must have had a happy event while they were gone. “Stop, we’re happy!”

“What you are is *awful*,” Meng Yao corrected him, tucking his hands into his sleeves and turning away.

“Don’t be like that. We’ll be the ones coming up with your tests soon,” Wei Ying cajoled him and Lan Zhan felt something relax.

“Alas for you,” Meng Yao sniffed, relenting a bit. “Shufu suggested that *you* should be on *my* side of the wedding and Wangji should be on Xichen’s as my own people are deceased or aren’t acknowledging me.”

“Aiyah? Really?” Wei Ying laughed out loud. “You want me to torment my brother-in-law for you? Well, I could be persuaded...”

“Congratulations.” Lan Zhan interjected before anyone could get swept away.

Meng Yao stilled and nodded, suddenly vulnerable. “Thank you.”

“What changed your mind?” Wei Ying asked, lower.

Meng Yao looked down. "I was reviewing your wedding contract," he admitted. "I saw the provisions made for your children and saw how Yu-furen meant to take advantage of it. Xichen and I got into a fight about it, actually. I was out of sorts at the time, in my defense. Your mother-in-law is an experience, Lan-er-gongzi."

"Wangji." Wei Ying pointed at Lan Zhan and then at himself. "Wuxian. Start practicing now."

All Meng Yao did was roll his eyes.

"I was reviewing the language for your housing there. It was very clear to me that Lan-er... *Wangji*..." He colored again. "...was going to commit homicide if the Jiang Sect managed to interpret that section into granting you two rooms within Lotus Pier." Lan Zhan's expression must have been telling because Meng Yao nodded and said, "Yes, exactly."

"It's not so bad when there's no major event going on." Wei Ying defended his now adopted aunt. "She has an entire section of the house all to herself and doesn't come out often. The rest of the time she's out night hunting."

"Even so, the language in that part of the contract was vague and I... I snapped at him about it." Meng Yao admitted. "Xichen said if I had such strong feelings about Lan sect matters then I should commit fully to Lan sect so I could be present for any future negotiations."

Surely there'd been more to it than that, but Lan Zhan was not interested in that level of detail regarding his brother's home life.

Returning to the Jingshi was a restful event for the first time in far too long. There were no guards minding the yard. The wards were quiet rather than straining under the weight of the Yin Iron.

There would be *no war*.

Lan Zhan still couldn't quite wrap his head around it, but there was one final mystery he found he wanted the answer to.

"Who do you think it was who brought us back?" he asked Wei Ying as he helped his husband take his hair down.

To his surprise, Wei Ying turned around to stare at him. "Lan Zhan, didn't you realize? He all but announced it to us. Meng Yao confirmed it just now."

Lan Zhan frowned, trying to understand. "Zhao... Zhuliu?" he asked.

Wei Ying shook his head. "No, no, no. I mean, I already suspected who it was based on the note left with Xiaodan. I only know two people with handwriting that good and you already said it wasn't you," he explained. "No, I mean Nie-xiong. I don't know why he'd go to such lengths though. If you don't have any memory of death and I do then he would have had to work very fast after you had your accident."

"Nie Huaisang? The *headshaker*?" Lan Zhan asked, aghast.

“The *what?*” Wei Ying frowned and Lan Zhan recalled sadly that it had been long after Wei Ying’s time.

“Nie Huaisang became sect leader following the death of his brother some years after your death,” he explained. “Nie sect declined under his leadership and he leaned heavily on Jin Guangyao, who succeeded Jin Guangshan as the Chief Cultivator. He was most famous for saying ‘I don’t know, don’t ask me’ whenever he was asked anything at all.”

“Really?” Wei Ying leaned back into his chest; a habit that Lan Zhan was ready to embrace for a lifetime. “How did Nie Mingjue die?”

“Qi deviation. His temper spiralled out of control. His sworn brothers fought it for a long time, but eventually he succumbed to a very bad end.”

“Well, *there’s* a reason to make sure the war never happened.” Wei Ying turned in his arms and pressed a kiss to his mouth. “Speaking as someone who’s played weiqi against Nie-xiong with real money on the line, you’ll just have to believe me. Nie Huaisang is probably one of the finest strategic minds of our generation except he’s so lazy he doesn’t want to bother unless he’s been directly affected by something. Once he’s engaged, though, he’s a total monster and *nothing* stops him. Lan Zhan, there’s more to people than what they show you on the surface. You know what *I’ve* been thinking about?”

Lan Zhan cocked his head quizzically.

“How did they get the volcano to erupt?” Wei Ying asked and yes, that was a very good question indeed. “How did they get it to stop on command?”

“Could you do such a thing?” Lan Zhan asked.

“Well, sure, but I didn’t.” Wei Ying replied.

No, they’d been busy defending and collecting the Yin Iron, overhauling the defenses of Cloud Recesses with the timely and permanent acquisition of Meng Yao whose feelings for Xichen had never once been in question even after his ascension to Chief Cultivator, on top of arranging a major sect event for an enterprising mastermind to take advantage of. He was starting to be able to see it.

“You aren’t the only person who remembers the harmonies.” Lan Zhan pointed out, recalling that long ago conversation. “Wen-guniang...”

“...felt them like motion. What’s an eruption other than *motion*? It was her. He must have recruited her as soon as she left Cloud Recesses, otherwise I don’t know why she would have warned you about Wen Chao’s dog.” Wei Ying finished, echoing his own words. “He divided us up into neat little task groups, the little rat! You and I handled the Yin Iron. Wen Qing woke the mountain and positioned her brother for a seamless transition of power. I’m not sure what he had Wen... *Zhao* Zhuliu up to, but I’d have probably poached him too the first chance I got. That man is an amazing tool and Wen Chao wouldn’t have been able to take Lotus Pier without him.”

“Ah.” *That* was what Wei Ying had meant by Nie Huaisang making an announcement. “Meng Yao said that Zhao Zhuliu had been with Nie-er-gongzi for over ten years.”

They both were quiet for a moment, taking that in. It had only been about a year and a half since they’d woken up in the library together.

“Nie-xiong likes a long game,” Wei Ying said at last.

“This was a very convoluted plan to save one man’s life,” Lan Zhan confided later after half an hour had passed and they lay tangled together in the blessedly quiet darkness of the Jingshi.

It was just quiet enough for him to find the words to share a truth that had been lurking in the back of his mind since the subject of children had been raised in their wedding negotiations.

“Wei Ying.”

His husband stirred against his side, already half asleep. He lifted his face, rubbing at his eyes. “Mn?”

Lan Zhan wet his lips, “I have a confession.”

“Oh?” Wei Ying sounded a little more alert. “Is it an interesting one?”

“Do you remember the child at the Burial Mounds?” Lan Zhan swallowed on an odd knot in his throat. He had married this man. He didn’t know why admitting he’d found and raised Wei Ying’s child was so frightening to him.

“A-Yuan,” Wei Ying sank down onto the bed and into Lan Zhan’s side. “My poor little radish. I suppose he’ll have a longer life this time around. Do you think so?”

“He...” Lan Zhan rolled over on his side to face Wei Ying. “...he did not die when the DafanWen surrendered to the great sects. He managed to hide. I found him later when I attempted to retrieve your belongings. I brought him back to Cloud Recesses. I raised him as my own. He lived.”

“Huh,” Wei Ying huffed a laugh that couldn’t seem to decide if it was happy, sad, or disbelieving. He took Lan Zhan’s face in his hands and kissed him slowly. “Lan Zhan will never stop surprising me,” he whispered. “Thank you. If I could have picked any one of us to survive, it would have been him. *Thank you.*”

Wei Ying was quiet for a long time as they lay together, lips touching, practically sharing their air.

“Hypothetically speaking,” he said at last. “Is there any length you wouldn’t go to for Xichen’s sake?”

Lan Zhan frowned. “Wei Ying?” He asked.

“Mingjue is young for a qi deviation, even for a Nie.” Wei Ying tucked his face into Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “If Xichen was murdered and you were clever enough to come up with a



way to rewrite history so that it never happened, wouldn't you?"

"I wasn't that clever." Lan Zhan knew intimately well what it was like to lose someone so important, but he hadn't rebelled against it. He'd endured. It was entirely possible that he wouldn't ever understand someone with the type of determination necessary to overturn the heavens in such a way. "If I was... then yes. I would have."

He rolled over to face Wei Ying in the darkness.

"Wei Ying, what did Wen Zhuliu do to you?"

"Aiyah..." Wei Ying tucked himself into Lan Zhan's arms. "...what *didn't* he do? Killed my second parents, burned my home. That's not why you're asking."

"Do I still need to kill him?" Lan Zhan asked. He would, was the thing. If it meant keeping his husband intact, there wasn't *anything* he wouldn't do. No path would be too crooked for him to walk.

Maybe he *did* understand the tenacity required to overturn heaven.

"He destroyed Jiang Cheng's golden core on Wen Chao's orders." Wei Ying's words pierced him like an icicle. "Wen Qing owed me a favor and I called it in. I told Jiang Cheng I knew where Baoshan Sanren's mountain was and that I was allowed to ask her for help just once. He believed me."

*'If he stops using Suibian then you'll know you failed.'*

Of them all, only Wei Ying had come back without the cultivation level of an adult.

"Is that even possible?" Lan Zhan couldn't imagine it.

"If the donor is determined. If the surgeon is good enough. If the patient is convinced to fight." Wei Ying squeezed his arms around Lan Zhan's chest. "He was dying. I could handle life without a golden core. My cultivation doesn't define me the way it defines him and I didn't *dare* take my eyes off him after it happened. It destroyed him. I could tell some part of him was waiting for me to turn my back and he'd..."

*'Is there any length you wouldn't go to for Xichen's sake?'*

Lan Zhan held his husband close and didn't say anything right away. For Xichen, he might not. Xichen and Jiang Wanyin were very different people. Xichen would hate it beyond all measure and being tricked into accepting it might be what truly drove him beyond despair.

For Wei Ying, though?

He would, if he thought it would help and damn the consequences.

"I understand." Lan Zhan pressed his mouth into his husband's hair and held him as he shook. This had been a confession a long time in the making. Sometimes he'd used to imagine that Wei Ying was bursting with terrible secrets back in those bad old days. He'd

built a fantasy around getting Wei Ying to the peaceful sanctuary of Cloud Recesses where they could lance those secrets like cankers and together heal the wounds they left behind until not even scars remained.

Then Wei Ying would be happy again and anything would have been worth it if he could see his zhiji's unguarded smile one more time.

That was before Lan Zhan learned that scars never really did fade. They might not be visible, but the healed-over damage lingered under your skin pulling in inconvenient ways every so often just to remind you it was there.

"I understand," he said again and held onto his second chance with both arms.

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*Six months later*

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The guards on duty at the first gate were standing at attention by the time Lan Zhan officially had to take notice of them.

They smartened up slightly with reverent murmurs of "Hanguang-jun, Yiling Laozu."

Those titles had started to gain traction shortly after stories of the Tulu Xuanwu corpse began to spread out of Qinghe. Lan Zhan had no doubt they had their 'dear friend' Nie-er-gongzi, who'd settled into a life of frivolity following his successful ten year plan to destroy QishanWen, to thank for that but it was better than learning to respond to a whole new title so he did not complain.

"Shh!" Wei Ying hissed, which drew their attention first to him and then to the dozing contents of the sling over his chest.

A-Yuan was perhaps eight months old. Lan Zhan had never been able to picture him as a baby. He'd sprung forth as a chubby-cheeked toddler insofar as Lan Zhan's lacking imagination was concerned, but in reality he'd been born in the normal way of things.

In this case, he'd been born to a woman widowed by the Old Man when he woke to throw Nightless City off his back. She'd been delicate to begin with and a second cousin of Wen Qing's on her mother's side. She lived through childbirth, but her health never rallied again despite Wen Qing's most valiant efforts. A summer fever carried her off a few months later.

When Wen Qing found herself the child's -Wen Yuan's- only living relative, she wrote to Wei Ying. They left within an hour of her letter's arrival without even the need to discuss it -- despite the hell of wedding planning that had descended upon Cloud Recesses.

Xichen and Meng Yao had planned an ordinary Lan ceremony in the beginning with a few normal wedding rituals leading up to it. It would have been simple and as elegant as Meng Yao could make it, which was *very*.

Then Jin Zixuan, in response to their betrothal announcement, publicly acknowledged Meng Yao as his Shu sibling as a wedding gift and sent Lan a dowry of sixty-eight red chests. It was not the proverbial ‘ten miles of betrothal gifts’, but it was damn close.

It was a fairly transparent attempt on his part to win points with Jiang Yanli. He seemed more and more foolish over her every time they encountered one another and Yu-furen, having noticed it, pushed back the wedding a whole three years. It was nominally to observe the correct mourning period for Jin Guangshan, but in reality she intended to make Jin Zixuan wait long enough that he’d be desperate to marry her daughter and *hopefully* appreciate her more than Yu-furen’s own husband had ever appreciated her. So far it was working.

“That’s a...” One of the guards whispered before snapping his mouth shut under Lan Zhan’s glare.

It had been a *very* long journey from the Dafan foothills and A-Yuan had spent most of it crying his little poor heart out. He hadn’t adjusted well to flying until well into his teens and being a babe in arms didn’t seem to have changed that any. They’d been forced to set down about five miles away from the gates when Wei Ying got worried that he’d make himself sick.

Worn out from so much emotion and maybe the rocking sensation of Wei Ying’s gait, he’d passed out within a few minutes and had been blissfully asleep ever since. He’d be hungry when he woke up. Lan Zhan planned to have food and a clean diaper ready before he did, if possible, but that wasn’t going to happen if *a slack-jawed bystander* woke the baby up before he got the chance.

Naturally, Meng Yao -now formally Jin Zi yao- found them before they could reach the Jingshi. They had just turned into the garden and Lan Zhan was trying to remember what he had in their small kitchen that could be cooked down smooth for a small stomach when his brother’s betrothed rounded the corner on them looking like all hell was nipping at his heels.

The past few months had done wonders to knock the polished manners off Jin Ziyao when they were in private. In front of Shufu and the elders he was graciousness incarnate, but Wei Ying had counted it as a personal victory the first time Ziyao unbent enough to grab him by the bangs and haul him down to eye level during a scuffle.

“Where have you two been?” He hissed, not spotting A-Yuan right away. “Shufu has been looking for you for hours. Two of the shidi are crying because one of the older disciples told them they were too old to form cores and then one of the elders went and made it worse by going on about faulty core formation at them for a quarter shichen. They won’t listen to me when I tell them they’re right on schedule and I don’t have time to convince them because Jin-furen’s just invited herself to Cloud Recesses for the rest of the month and...” There, he calmed down enough to note the little cap of thin black hair that stuck up in stubborn cowlicks where it emerged from Wei Ying’s sling. “...that’s a *baby*.”

Xichen arrived not far behind his fiancée. “A-Yao, did you catch them? Shufu is...” He too stopped as Wei Ying shushed Ziyao the way he’d shushed the guards. “...that is a...”

“...*sleeping* baby,” Lan Zhan finished for him pointedly.

“That’s why you left so suddenly?” Xichen crept closer and Wei Ying turned so they could get a good look at A-Yuan’s deceptively angelic sleeping face. “*Wangji*.”

“Qing-jie came into sole custody of him, but she’s so busy with the restoration effort that she can’t spare any time,” Wei Ying explained quietly. “She waited until he was weaned and asked if we were interested in adopting him. We left right away. She sounded desperate for help.”

A-Yuan chose that moment to come sweetly awake. Lan Zhan braced for more crying, but A-Yuan’s even temper was already in evidence. He just yawned and blinked over his shoulder at the two new faces in his life.

Xichen offered him a fingertip, which A-Yuan obligingly grabbed for. “Wangji, I remember when you were this size.”

“Doubtful,” Lan Zhan replied repressively. Xichen was all of two years older than him and the age gap became less and less impressive the older they got. He glanced in Ziyao’s direction and noticed that his future brother-in-law was rooted in place, staring at the baby.

“Ziyao, come say hello.” Wei Ying called over to him. “He’s in a good mood. Catch him while he’s being cute! Do you want to hold him?”

Lan Zhan observed as Ziyao reached for his nephew with trembling hands and smiled at Xichen who frowned back as he realized what this development meant.

Ziyao might be bringing Lan an advantageous connection to a still-wealthy and now far more tolerable incarnation of the Jin sect, but *Wei Ying* had provided the family’s first grandson.

‘Beat *that*,’ he thought.

-fin

## Chapter End Notes

MY, immediately: NO. You cannot have one.

LXC: BUT!

MY: WE ARE NOT EVEN MARRIED YET.

Re: Our Benevolent Mastermind

It was NHS, but we all knew that.

I figure NHS had multiple plans, but they were divided between ‘Plans that Bring Da-ge back in a way that he is recognizable and won’t immediately kill himself again over’ and ‘Plans where I get revenge for my brother’s death.’

In canon he would have gone for the latter because for this fic to work, he has to die probably by his own hand. Would NMJ be ok with that? BIG No. So it's now Plan B.

Unfortunately Plan A gets scuttled when LWJ dies in a freak accident. NHS can conceivably find someone willing to sacrifice their soul to resurrect the Yiling Laozu. Finding a second person willing to do the same for Hanguang-jun at around the same time is a harder sell. You can't keep a WWX calm and predictable without a LWJ around, so NHS goes to his backup plan which is higher risk, but also higher reward.

Unfortunately, in order to make it work he needed to rehabilitate some of his chess pieces. ZZ was an easier sell than MY, but I figure that NHS knows just enough about trying to survive in a hyper masculine environment that MY got one (1) chance to prove that he could do better.

Is he being watched constantly like a hawk for the slightest sign of slipping into his evil manipulative ways? Absolutely. Does it look like it's going to happen? Not really. Does NHS have complicated feelings about the implications of that outcome? BIG yes.

Is there a strong chance of NHS/ZZ happening offscreen? Who can say. If there are, then there are extreme Combat Butler vibes and NHS probably has no idea ZZ caught feels.

## End Notes

Here is my usual tumblr plug: come visit me at TheFeelsWhale! :3

If you are interested in my original projects, swing by and visit me on Royal Road. I'm Miscellea there.

<https://www.royalroad.com/profile/175208>

My current original project is called #FairyPrincessProblems. Come check it out!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!